

Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind

2



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♣Me at Age Eight

“HM?”

“What is it, Tina?”

The one who answered me was Nakona Ril, my stepsister who had moved into our home that doubled as an inn the year before last. She’s a pretty girl who wears her pink hair in a braid.

We didn’t start off on the best terms, but since she opened up to me, she became a kind older sister who looks out for me. Since she always helped with managing the inn, I felt comfortable picking up the notebook I was writing in and showing her what I was working on.

“I feel like the food we’ve been serving has been getting repetitive recently. We’ve just been making the same dishes, so I’ve been wondering if we could diversify our menu...”

“Oh, yeah, I get what you mean. But is it really *that* bad? Most of our guests are travelers, anyway. They stay here for three, maybe four days tops.”

“Yeah, but I feel like we shouldn’t be satisfied leaving it this way... Oh! I know, maybe we can add a dish that changes every month? If we just add in one new meal, it shouldn’t be much of a burden, and maybe it’ll increase the number of returning guests every month!”

“Why not? I think that’s a good idea.”

“I’ll go tell Dad!”

“Have fun!”

With that decided, I struck while the iron was hot! I hurried out of the inn’s coffee corner and over to Dad, who was cleaning up around Lake Rhio. But as I approached him, I discovered something looked off.

“Dad? What’s wrong?”

“Mm? Ah, Tina. Look at this.”

“What is it?”

Dad pointed at a thicket by the trees and then raised his hand, as if signaling me to not come any closer.

“Th-That’s...!”

Bees! A bunch of bees were swarming around the thicket. And not just any bees...but *honeybees*!

I think this is the first time I’ve seen honeybees in this world! Wait, doesn’t this mean we could...?

“Dad! Let’s raise these bees!”

“Wh-Where did that crazy idea come from all of a sudden?”

“Beekeeping isn’t crazy! Remember that flower field halfway up the mountain? If we raise the bees there, they’ll multiply, and we’ll get a steady supply of honey...!”

“Honey?”

“Honey! You can spread it on bread, put it in tea or milk, transmute it into medicine, mix it in with soap... There’s no end to its uses!”

This is a stroke of luck! Let’s catch them so we can get a good supply of honey!

“How are you even going to catch these bees anyway?”

“Well, erm. I figured maybe...we could use a box?”

“What kind of box?”

“E-Er...”

Oh no! I don’t know how beehives are built. I think it’s something along the lines of dividing the interior of a large box with planks, and...

I tried to explain it to Dad while drawing on memories of my past life, and he eventually seemed to catch on to what I was trying to get across.

“Real beehives have layers, so you create what looks like a fake hive with the box. Is that the gist of it?” Dad deserves all the credit for being smart enough to understand me. My explanation wasn’t all that good. “That sounds interesting. Let’s try to make it!”

“It will be fun! And if we can get the bees to go inside the box, we should move them to the flower field. We wouldn’t want them to sting the guests around the inn...”

“Good idea. Sounds like a great way to spare both the bees and us from any unfortunate fates.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking!”

And not just that! We’ll be able to live in symbiosis, Dad!

“By the way, didn’t you come out here to talk to me about something?”

“Oh, right! I actually wanted to discuss our menu with you...”

I told Dad about the monthly menu idea, to which he replied

with an impressed smile, "I'm surprised you came up with that." He patted me on the head. He wasn't opposed to doing it, but we decided the monthly dishes would be my responsibility.

With honey, we'd be able to make various sweets. Sweets were a precious, rare commodity in this world, so they'd definitely draw attention if we sold them.

"That just leaves..." Dad started pensively.

"Hm?"

"A boat."

"A boat for what...?"

"When I was little, we had a boat here. You know how Lake Rhode is a big lake? Well, people used to go fishing from the boat rentals we had back then."

"Oh! That sounds like fun!"

"Yeah, it was. Ma and Pops would sail out to the heart of the lake and say sweet nothings to each other..."

"How romantic!"

That sounds so sweet! If more travelers like Roin and Enofa show up, I'd love to recommend that to them!

"Yeah, but I have no idea how to make a boat. I'll have to ask a carpenter from Fei Lu to do it. Wouldn't want to put people on a badly cobbled-together boat that ends up sinking in the middle of the lake."

A boat... Of course, I didn't know how to make one either. Dad simply shrugged it off, saying that we were short on money and that there were more important things to get before a boat. Asking someone else to do it would be expensive...

Honestly, the inn had a lot of things that needed fixing up. We were two girls living with a one-armed knight. Bandits often tried to attack us. But thankfully, there weren't any bandits around that were stronger than Dad or Nakona.

"Mm?"

Just as Dad made to return to the inn, he noticed someone approaching us on horseback. People rarely came during the morning, and it was especially rare for someone who didn't look like they could fight to show up. And while this person was on horseback, they weren't armed.

"Oh, my apologies. This is the Rofola Lodge, yes?"

Who is this?

What I thought was a horse at first turned out to be a donkey.

And the rider had what looked like a yellow cockatiel sitting perched on their shoulder. They had a beard, and after getting off the donkey in a single motion, they took off their hat, bowing their head respectfully. They looked very gentlemanly and were clad in expensive clothes...

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Jilril, a friend of Sirius... You remember Sirius, yes?"

"Oh? Ah, *erm*, yes!"

"Oh, that man..."

So is he a...?

I looked at the man's ears and found that they were round and perfectly humanlike. *So he isn't an elf.* The fact he was Sirius's friend made me awfully cautious of him, though...

I mean, Sirius was a nice man. He was, but yeah...

"Sirius recommended this place to me. 'There's a talented girl living at this one inn, so you'd do well to visit her,' he said!"

"Huh?!" Dad and I exclaimed in unison.

"I assume you're that talented girl?"

"U-Uh..."

T-Talented girl?! Who, me?!

Having Sirius shower me with compliments felt pretty nice at the time, but if anyone's talented here, it's Nakona! She applies her efforts in a whole different direction from me, but she's plenty talented!

"That shady, half-elf adventurer... I mean, I understand that both my girls are talented little geniuses. You said you came to see her... Do you have some kind of business with Tina?"

Whoa, Dad, you're in anti-weirdo mode! What would you do if he just came to stay at the inn?!

"I'd love to see her talents at work. Despite appearances, I'm actually a chairman at an academy in Saikorea. I love to scout talented children to my academy and offer them aid."

"A-An academy in Saikorea...?!"

Sirius suggested it at the time, but can I really go study alchemy there...? Did he really go this far to get me into a school?!

I mean, I'm interested in learning more, but I also want to renovate the Rofola Lodge and bring in more guests. And I'd also like to try to recreate some of my past life's cooking, too. Besides, staying at this inn is beneficial for medicine making in its own way.

"That's right. Well, honestly, having come this far, I can certainly see the need for an inn in this area. To that end, I won't

try to twist your arm on this. Building up talent is important, but if one isn't in the right environment, they'll never truly grow."

"Um, I guess so..."

"However, if the talented have the desire to learn...then I believe I can make their wish come true by preparing the right environment for their development. I want to give those who wish to learn the chance to do so."

I fell into a pensive silence and looked up at Dad. *I do think this Jilril person is a strange man, but...he's nowhere near as shady as Sirius was. Honestly, he just looks like someone who takes pleasure in teaching others.*

"With all that said, I would like to see just how much the young miss knows. You don't mind, do you?"

"Uh...well, yes, I do... No, wait, give me a moment. What do you want to do about him, Tina?" Dad asked me.

"Hm, well...I get the feeling he means well, one way or another..."

"Does he? He looks like he's more occupied with his own intellectual curiosity. Like that old stooge, Sirius."

Wh-When you put it like that, I kind of start feeling the same way!

"Now, young miss, speak to me about any topic you'd like! Oh! I've heard you're a budding alchemical apothecary. Perhaps you could show me how you concoct something?"

"W-Well, I, *erm*, don't have many ingredients on hand right now... I can't make anything impressive!"

"I don't mind! Show me your work process, even if it's for a low-grade brew."

"Aaah..."

"Anyway, if you're going to stay with us, could you check in at the counter?"

Nice, Dad! Way to get him off my back!

"Oh, yes, of course. Incidentally, are you all right with me bringing a pet?"

"A pet?"

"Chirp chirp! Papa! Kanet not pet! Kanet Papa's child!"

"Right you are. My apologies, Kanet. You're not a pet, you're my precious son."

"Chirp chirp!"

"Whoa..."

The bird on Mister Jilril's shoulder talked! And really fluently at

that! It's so cute!

"This little one is Kanet. And this lass right here is Roxanne," he added, gesturing to the donkey. "I hope you can get along with them too."

"I'm called Tinaris. Nice to meet you, Kanet!"

"Nice to meet! Nice to meet!"

"My smart boy," Mister Jilril said affectionately. "He can sing, too."

"It can sing?" Dad and I asked as one.

"He can! Maybe I'll have him entertain us during dinner. Now then, do we have somewhere safe to let poor Roxanne rest?"

"Oh, yes, the stable's this way."

We led Roxanne over to the stable and Jilril and Kanet over to one of the cottages. For now, it looked like this man had an interest in me, or rather, in my talents. He said he wanted to see me concoct medicine, so I got to work on making something simple.

"Oh ho! I see you have your own workshop."

"Yes. A very simple one, though..."

"Oh, no, it's quite wonderful!"

Making a low-grade tonic, also known as the healing salve, is quite simple. The ingredients are Duana flowers and water, and the tools are a pot and a stirring rod. You need to stir the materials and feed the concoction mana until it lights up. Once it does, the tonic should be complete. The results should look like a light-pink fluid.

It can heal scrapes and cuts, but ideal quality ones can be as effective as a medium-grade tonic. That can bump its price up, but it'd still be cheaper than a normal quality medium-grade tonic.

As it happened, the tonic I just made was ideal quality. *Hehe!*

"The process, the ingredients, and your mana... All of them, wonderful! Yes, you certainly would make for a wonderful student."

"Er...thank you?"

"Incidentally, do you usually make medicine like this for adventurers?"

"Ah, well, yes."

"It's a bit of a waste, I'll admit. Have you considered making ingested medicine for household use? There's medicine for treating stomachaches, headaches, stiff shoulders, fatigue, nutrient additives, and even compresses for treating muscle pain..."

"Ah!"

I never made any of those, and they all sound like they'd be useful

for the inn! Lico taught me how to make medicine for menstrual pain, but I haven't tried anything else. And the recipe book in the study was old, so it didn't have any recipes for compresses!

"I'd like to make those!"

"Splendid! I'll write down their recipes. Could I have a pen and paper?"

"Here you go!" I said, handing him a pen and paper I had in my workshop. As I did, he smiled for some reason.

Wh-What?

"Young Tinaris, do you know how ink and paper are made?"

"How?"

I didn't. We always got them from Giyaga. *Come to think of it, though, it seems like paper should be really difficult to make... It's not like there are paper mills around like there were in Japan. And what about ink?*

I didn't wonder too much about how it was made in my past life. But now that he brought it up, maybe...!

"Could it be...?"

"Exactly. Alchemists make them. Paper is extremely important, so there are alchemists who make producing paper their specialty. Demand for it never goes down, so they never run out of work. And it's a fiber, so it can be reused. Many potential alchemists choose to become alchemical paper craftsmen as it ensures a steady income."

Really?!

I could understand where they were coming from. Paper was useful for a lot of things. When Grandpa needed medicine, kitchen paper was part of the process.

Making paper with alchemy... Why haven't I thought of that? And it's important, so it's good for business too!

"Well, medicine is also quite important and sells for high prices, too. Adventurers wouldn't get far without them. Household remedies and medicine for use in hospitals are just as important, though. Not just alchemists, but apothecaries must always keep their skills polished."

"Yes!"

I agree! I want to learn how to make all sorts of stuff!

"Erm, all the medicine you just described, and paper, and ink... Could you teach me how to transmute all these daily necessities, please...?"

"Heheh! Very good! Just like Sirius said, your desire to learn is

quite impressive! Of course I can. It's why I came here!"

"Thank you very much!"

"What would you like to start with? I'll jot everything down in order."

"Please do! I think first should be, *um*, a painkiller."

"*Mm-hm*. A painkiller."

Mister Jilril went on to teach me all sorts of recipes, but I lacked the ingredients for many of them, so I had to make do with just listening to the recipe. But paper required tree bark and either Amamo seaweed or spider webs. So I hurried over to the shed to get some bark from our firewood.

That just leaves the spider webs, but...

"Tina, it's almost time for dinner." Nakona approached me. "Huh. What are you *doing* over by the shed?"

"Mister Jilril taught me the recipe for transmuting paper, so I thought I'd try it out," I explained. "But I can't find any spider webs..."

"Huh? Spider webs? Y-You use spider webs for alchemy?"

"I do!" I nodded with a grin as Nakona took a startled step back.

Hehe. She's probably better off not knowing I use it to make soap.

"Is Mister Jilril our only guest today?"

"Yep. The group that stayed here yesterday checked out this morning. Speaking of which, how long do you think he's going to stay?"

"I don't think he decided on an exact length yet."

"He looks kind of *weird*... You all right with him?"

"Yeah. He is a little strange, but he taught me all sorts of recipes."

"*Mm*? Just don't spend too much time with him alone. You're a cute girl, after all!"

Nakona is the one person in the house I don't want to hear that from. She put most pretty girls to shame with her looks. She's even cute when she's angry! Still, I get what she's trying to say, and I appreciate the concern.

"Yeah. You be careful too, Nakona."

"I'll be fine. I beat a boar and a big bear with one punch today!"

"Yes, yes."

It feels like the local wildlife is growing more helpless against her

by the day.

“Anyway, I’m counting on you to dry some jerky for tomorrow ☆!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...”

You can use alchemical drying to turn meat into dried jerky. You just season it with salt and dry it like you would any other ingredient. That’s all! It’s simple and easy to make a lot of, so the pantry on the inn’s second floor is full of jerky. But since I sell it to customers, just like the medicine, it actually gets consumed rather quickly.

And besides, if we hunt too many carnivores, the herbivores might start to overpopulate. Taking too much from nature can bring all sorts of complicated consequences.

I’d considered making dried fish provisions, but apparently, dried fish looked pretty disgusting to people in this world. Nakona and Dad were repulsed by the idea.

It’s tasty, though...

I tried roasting it in a fire and had Dad eat the results. He changed his mind at once and went, “Gods of De Marl, this is so tasty. I can’t stop eating it, I need some booze!” But that made him drink so much alcohol, I had to stop.

On that day, I received a grim reminder of how scary dried fish provisions can be in the wrong hands.

But I did want to make some, since they were useful as ingredients for other recipes, but Dad might snack on them while drinking... *This, too, has complicated consequences...*

“Oh, right, since it’s just Mister Jilril here, we should ask him if there’s anything in particular he wants to eat.”

“Well, if there are no other guests, why not? I’m looking forward to trying your new dish, Tina!”

“You make it sound like it’s already been decided!”

I mean, if we have the ingredients ready, I guess I could. But shouldn’t we ask Mister Jilril what he wants first?

“Dad, about Mister Jilril...”

“When I told him we have a hot spring, he went to take a dip, and he said he wants something hot enough to burn his mouth for dinner... Got any ideas, Tina?”

Wh-What? That’s an unusual request.

Dad had already asked him what he wanted to eat, but the

answer was so weird, it made me completely forget to thank Dad.

"I didn't understand what he meant either, so I asked him five more times."

That's some thorough double-checking!

"Wh-What do you think, Tina?" Dad asked me uncomfortably. "Personally, I think food shouldn't burn your mouth, but..."

"I-I think so, too..."

"He did say that even if it sears his tongue, he'd just drink some tonic, and it would heal him at once."

"I don't think that's the problem here."

"Probably not... So, what do we do?"

What do we do? Something hot enough to burn the mouth? Why would he ask for that?

N-No, if that's what the guest wants, we should accommodate. Still, the order is so vague, I can't even begin to imagine where to start with it. I don't get it!

But if he wanted to eat something hot, I had a few recipes—from both this life and my past life—that would fit the bill. *I could make hamburger steak with what we've got. Nakona hunted some boars and bears, so if we can just get the smell out of them, it should be simple enough. If what he wanted was piping hot food, a well-stirred hamburger steak should do the trick, right?*

There were other options like steak, boar stew, a hot pot...

Oh, right! A hot pot! How about that?

But I wasn't sure how to actually make hot pot. *We don't even have any earthen pots anyway... Earth pots... Earthen...pots...*

"Earthen pots..."

"*Er*fen pots? What's that?"

"Earthen pots are pots made from dirt! *Er*, I read about it in a book! You use clay from the ground and fashion it into a pot, and then roast it in real hot fire until its shape solidifies. It creates a really good pot that doesn't let the heat escape!"

"Hmm. That sounds interesting, but going that far just for one guest feels a little...well, excessive."

"...Yeah."

Going as far as making earthen pots for this feels like a waste. So, I guess a well-stirred hamburger steak would work.

"All right! I know what I'm making!"

"Oh, good work. So, do I leave dinner to you?"

"Yeah! I'll handle it!"

So that's decided. Tonight, we're having well-fried hamburger steak!



I went into the kitchen, where I began mincing up the meat. Of course, working on it tired me out, so I relied on Nakona and her superior physical prowess to handle it for me.

“What, are you making sausages?” she asked me when I came to her for help.

“No, I’m making well-fried hamburger steak... He said he wants to eat something piping hot, so I figured a hamburger steak would do.”

“Well-fried...hamburger? You mean, like those tasty hamburgers you made a while back?”

“The very same!”

The memories from my past life were a bit hazy, but I remembered meat dishes were pretty popular.

With that in mind, we minced up some boar meat. We also cut oniuns (this world’s version of onions) and mixed together eggs, bread crumbs, salt, pepper, and rugmegs (this world’s version of nutmeg, I think). Also, since the meat had a strong, gamey smell, we put in a lot of jaji (this world’s version of ginger) to mask the scent.

Since Dad and Nakona didn’t like vegetables, I added Eas leaves to soak away the smell. Eas leaves don’t have much of a flavor, so they wouldn’t spoil the dish for them.

After mixing everything up, I rolled the mixture into balls slightly larger than palm-size and then struck them with both hands to get the air out. I put the prepared patties onto a slightly warm frying pan and heated them on a strong fire until their surface became grilled. I let the burgers heat up until they changed shape and then flipped them over and roasted them on a weaker flame.

But this wasn’t enough to be called well-fried hamburger steak. To that end, I decided to make some soup today. I used milk—not cow milk, but Rofolamem milk. Rofolamems are basically goats. I added sliced timates (tomatoes) and lots of water. Salt, pepper, Ruel grass, sliced oniuns, jaji, and some vegetable broth I had ready. I added freshly picked mushrooms, butter, and a tiny bit of mana.

I used an iron plate with a deep bottom to cook it in.

"It looks good. What's the soup in that pot for?"

"That's a good question, Nakona. It's to do this with these well-roasted hamburgers!" I said grandly as I dipped the patties into the soup.

"Whoaaaaa?! Why'd you put them in the soup?! You just finished frying them!"

"Well, technically, it's not soup. It's a sauce."

I then boiled the patties for a while longer in the sauce. *Stir, stir, stir stir stir.*

Mm, it smells nice! Oh, I gotta flip them over as they cook every now and then, so one side doesn't get burnt... And...

"It's ready!"

"Wow, this looks tasty, too...! But I wanted to eat that hamburger steak as is."

"Well-fried hamburger is hamburger, too. Try it! You'll see it's good."

"Well, I'm not doubting that. You made it, after all."

Why, thank you!



"OOH, this looks wonderful!" Mister Jilril exclaimed upon seeing the meal.

"You asked for something that would burn your mouth, so I made some of the burn medicine you taught me today."

"Oh ho, that's quite considerate of you. Now, we shouldn't let it go cold! Bring it over. I'll have the whole pot, actually! I'll eat the pot itself!"

Yep, you're a creep~♥!

"I actually wanted to make some hot pot, but we don't have any earthen pots..."

"Hot pot...? Are earthen pots like those pots made of clay the dwarves use in the demi-human continent?"

"Oh! You know about them?!"

This world has earthen pots, after all?!

Even this world has hot pots in its culture! Why, with an earthen pot, I could...make hot pot dishes! Lots of them! If I knead flour powder with salt and water, I could make noodles! And then, after

eating a hot pot dish, I could have noodles the next day with the leftover broth...!

“I-I think that’s the kind of earthen pot I mean, yes!”

“I thought so.”

Jilril then leaned back and took an earthen pot out of his back. I repeat. Jilril. Took an *earthen pot*! Out of his back!

You might not understand what I’m saying. Even *I’m* not really sure what I’m talking about. But as I put what I saw into words, I came to the realization that this man is, indeed, the same kind of person as Sirius.

“What the?” I could only manage this shocked reply.

“A dwarf made me this earthen pot when I visited the demi-human continent... And yes, most of the food cooked in this pot is indeed quite hot.”

I imagine it was, since earthen pots are good at containing heat. Anything you boil in them is going to stay that way for a while. Making it perfect for a man with *unique* preferences like Mister Jilril... But, well, it’s useful even for people who aren’t looking to burn their mouths. Touching it with your hands can get you burned, too... Though getting burned shouldn’t be your objective!

“Excuse me, that pot...!”

“What say you, miss? Will you exchange this dish’s recipe for this earthen pot?”

“You mean you want the recipe for the well-fried hamburger?”

“I do indeed. This is the first time I’ve tasted anything like it. It’s quite fascinating...” Mister Jilril said, taking gluttonous bites out of the patty.

He writhed in his chair, mouthing the words “Mmm, hot” as he ate it delightedly. Seeing him enjoy his food made me happy, since I was the one who cooked it, but for reasons that were actually quite clear to me, I was getting some mixed feelings about that reaction of his...!

But still, this exchange is perfect for me...!

“Of course I can give you the recipe! If you’d let me, I’ll even cook the next one with this pot!”

“Oh ho? That’s a pretty bold statement you’ve made there.”

It is? Is he thinking I won’t know how to use this pot properly?

“The dwarves use these pots to make snacks that go with alcohol. They were made to simmer this extremely hard mushroom

called the Gondelz.”

“G-Gondelz?”

Just the name gave me a bad feeling about it...

“This mushroom right here, actually,” he said, leaning back to pull something out of his back again.

“You’ve got one?!” Dad, Nakona, and me all exclaimed at the same time.

What’s going on with this man’s back?! I’m scared!

He pulled out what looked like a goosefish. Or, well, something grotesque that looked like a goosefish, but he called it a mushroom... I fearfully took a step closer to examine it, but Dad and Nakona grabbed me by the shoulders.

“What are you doing, Tina?! That looks dangerous!”

“W-Well, I figured since he brought it, I should cook it...”

“You shouldn’t go near that thing! Let daddy handle this!” Dad exclaimed.

“H-Huuuuuh?! ”

I appreciate how reliable you’re being, but isn’t this exaggerated?!

With those heated words, Dad nervously approached the mushroom Mister Jilril was holding out. Mister Jilril was eyeing our reactions with amusement, but I suppose Dad didn’t notice that.

“...It does look like a mushroom,” he said after accepting it from Mister Jilril and examining it cautiously.

“...Oh? Could it be a...” I took a step forward.

“Stay back, Tina!” Nakona warned me. “Don’t go near it until Daddy says it’s safe!”

“I-It’s fine,” I said, shrugging her off. I appreciated her concern but still approached the Gondelz mushroom Dad was holding.

That’s... Yeah, I knew it! That’s what it reminds me of...!

It was abnormally large—about as big as an adult male’s torso—but its shape reminded me of a shiitake mushroom!

Yeah, if you boil it and drink it along with booze, it should taste good. And given how large it is, I can see why they’d need an earthen pot to do it.

The dwarves’ pot was larger than any I’d seen in my past life, but it’d have to be that big to boil this giant mushroom.

“Well?” Mister Jilril asked me. “Think you can cook this Gondelz mushroom?”

“I can!” I asserted. “With this pot, it should be easy!”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, impressed.

"Tina? Are you sure about this?" Nakona asked me, her face contorted with a hint of disgust. "This mushroom looks gross..."

"Don't worry! I'll handle it. Tomorrow, we'll be having udon in a pot of broth!"

"What in a pot of what?" Dad asked, visibly confused.

"Isn't udon that thing you made the other day?" Nakona asked.

"Yeah! I'll simmer it in this pot! *Hehe!* For tomorrow's dinner, we'll be having a hot pot party!"

"A hot what party?"

"A hot pot party!"

A party where you gather around a hot pot and eat your fill!



AND so, the next day, I brought the pot outside, where we had a dwarf-style bonfire to hold our hot pot party! Dwarf-style bonfires have rocks on four sides, meant to support the heavy earthen pot. You then start the bonfire under the pot. You keep the fire going, letting it heat the pot throughout the evening.

They munch on the Gondelz mushroom as they drink the night away. That's the dwarves' way of having fun, it seems. Jilril is human, but he liked dwarf eating habits where they drank alcohol while stuffing their mouths with food hot enough to burn their tongue.

So, yeah, Mister Jilril has weird fetishes. No doubting that.

But since he went as far as supplying me with the earthen pot necessary to cook what he wants, I'll do as our guest requested!

"Well? What are you gonna make after keeping the fire running all day long?"

"We start with this!" I said, holding up a plate of fish.

"Fish?"

"Yep. I'll dry these fish right here, and the other fish I'll simmer in the pot."

"Soup stock?"

"That's right!"

The Gondelz mushroom should produce some tasty broth, too, but I figured I'd play it safe and go with some small fish soup stock. I also wanted to test what would happen if I put the fish in water with mana before turning it into soup. Would the fish melt entirely

into the water, making the perfect soup stock?

“Let’s do this!”

“You’re using alchemy?!” Nakona asked me, her eyes wide.

“Yeah. It’s fine! Alchemy is basically no different from cooking.”

“A-Are you sure about that?”

“Don’t worry about it. I mean, sure, I might mess it up sometimes... But, based on my experience, nothing weird should happen!”

“Really *now*?” She sounded skeptical.

Wow, rude!

But while I sounded confident, I couldn’t deny being a bit anxious. This was my first time trying it, after all.

But hey, I’m just putting some mana into dried fish and water. It shouldn’t explode.

“Let’s do this!” I said again.

I’m challenging an unestablished recipe and delving into unexplored territory! Even the dried fish is something I came up with by applying a technique I learned to make Grandpa’s medicine. It’ll go fine this time, too! I just know it! And besides, making fish soup stock is a world in and of itself.

I was using small river fish instead of dried sardines, but the taste wasn’t any match for real sardines. I also tried drying some algae from the lake, but it wasn’t as good as the kelp I knew, either... Not that I ate kelp much, anyway.

The same thing happened when I tried imitating making dried bonito flakes. Bonito were fish found in the sea, so I naturally couldn’t find anything like them at the lake. Since I didn’t have anything exactly like them on hand, I tried using larger fish that inhabited the lake, but it didn’t work out at all.

Also, once...in my past life, I saw a cooking show where they made soup stock from vegetable leftovers, and I tried to make it, but...that ended up being more sweet than savory.

The thing is, making just vegetable soup stock is kind of hard... In my old life, you could take a string bag of mandarins and boil it for a few hours. But here, I’d have to get a thin cloth bag and boil it for half a day in a campfire outside. It’s a little too much effort for that flavor...!

So, the easiest way of making soup stock here is by using dried fish. *To that end, if this experiment works out, I’ll be able to greatly*

expand the repertoire of dishes I can cook!

“Ah!”

“Oh, it lit up!”

“Yeah... The color looks good.”

“Huh? It does? It looks kind of muddy.”

“Yeah, but that’s how soup stock is supposed to look, right?”

Really transparent soup stock kind of looks like kelp soup stock.

Kelp... Will we ever meet again...? How I long for you, kelp...

I shook off my reveries. *Time to taste it!* I scooped up a bit with a small saucer and gave it a taste.

“How is it?” Nakona peered into my face.

I remained silent for a moment.

“That’s a pretty long pause.”

“...Mm. Well...it’s a little different from what I expected.”

“What, did it turn out bad?”

“I wouldn’t call it bad, it’s just... A bit too bitter, I guess. It’s probably because I dried the fish without cleaning out the entrails...”

“Bitter, huh? How bitter are we talking here?”

“Wanna try it?”

Nakona nodded, so I scooped up more of the soup and hand the saucer over to her. As soon as she brought it to her lips, she furrowed her brows.

“Yeah, it’s not bad, but it’s...bitter.”

“Well, it’s perfectly edible, so let’s use it as is for now,” I concluded and proceeded to jot down the recipe.

I noted that next time, I should use bigger fish and remove their entrails before drying them. I had more things to test out before the recipe was perfect.

“So, what do we do with how bitter it is?”

“Let’s use vegetables! They’re savory; that should cancel it out.”

Bitterness can accentuate a dish, so trying to gloss over it wouldn’t be wise. So, we should use it, instead. Nakona and I still had a childish sense of taste, so the bitterness was probably too strong for us. But for adults like Dad and Mister Jilril, it probably wouldn’t seem as bitter. With that in mind, I chopped up some vegetables and sprinkled them into the pot.

Nakona panicked upon seeing this, asking, “Are you sure you

should stuff it all in the pot like that?!”

Veggies soften when you simmer them, so it's fine!

“Oh, by the way, Big Sis, since you're so strong, could you make me some udon noodles?” I asked her, faking a baby voice.

“...Oh, those long things? That's tiring to make.”

“...You won't do it for me?” I gazed at her, doing my best impression of a baby doe.

“I'm not *saying* that. It's tiring...but it does taste good.”

You're staring off into the distance, though!

“I'll get the udon flouel ready, then!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

I should do this while she's still motivated!

Udon is made from wheat flour, called flouel in this world, along with salt and just enough water to make it sticky. I collected enough so the powder didn't stick to my fingers and handed it over to Nakona. Normally, you'd spread a vinyl sheet and have multiple people stomp on it, but...

“Araaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

Nakona delivered a flurry of punches! The impact of the blows made the flouel change shape multiple times in midair! As the flouel dropped back down, Nakona delivered her combo, preventing it from falling to the ground.



But this isn't enough. If we don't knead it more, the udon won't be springy enough!

"Keep going, Nakona!"

"I'll do it! Atatatatatatatatatatatatatata!"

As Nakona did her thing, I sat next to her and practiced some of the household medicine recipes I learned yesterday while watching over the pot. Yep, the veggies were shriveling up nicely.

I'd like to put some meat in there, but we'll be using the Gondelz mushroom this time!

I cut it up into six pieces.

It looks horrible!

Imagine a huge, black shiitake mushroom covering a pot! *Even though I'm fond of shiitake mushrooms, it still grosses me out...!*

But it does smell nice. It'll be good, for sure! Thick, juicy shiitake mushrooms that have taken in the soup stock's flavor... It'll be great!

"Tiiiiina, is the udon flouel ready?"

"Lemme see!"

I can't forget the other main dish!

I checked the udon flouel I had Nakona beat up, and... *Yep! It's looking good!*

"I'll handle the rest!"

"I'm pooped!" Nakona fell to the ground and let out an exhausted sigh.

"Thanks, Nakona!"

I took the udon flouel Nakona kneaded for me and spread it out over the clean table. I cut it into pieces of appropriate length and set it on the plate.

Preparations are complete!

"Oh, something smells nice," Dad said, coming over with some firewood under his arm.

"Thanks for chopping the wood, Dad!"

"Did you really use that monster mushroom in your cooking?"

"Hehe... Wanna give it a taste?"

Dad and Nakona both regarded me with morbid silence. *I can understand their aversion given how nasty the mushroom looked, but still, they should see how it tastes before they jump to conclusions.*

Honestly, I was pretty curious about how it tasted. *It looks like a shiitake mushroom, but who's to say if it really is the same?* I cut a piece of the mushroom, put it on a wooden plate, and then divided

it into three parts with a fork.

“Whoa...!”

“Wow, for how bad it looks, it sure smells nice!” Nakona exclaimed.

“Yeah, it does smell good. Still, it looks kind of blegh...”

Well, since you two are so scared of trying it, I'll take responsibility as the cook and taste it!

Nom!

“Mmmmmmm!” I let out a delighted squeak. “It’s so good! It took in all the soup stock and it’s so juicy! The more I chew on it, the more it fits the mushroom’s texture! It’s so good!”

Dad and Nakona exchanged wary glances, but I regarded their mixed reactions with a smile. That made the two of them drum up the courage to bring the Gondelz mushroom to their lips. Their expressions lit up at once, telling me they understood what I meant now.

“You’re right! It’s completely different from what I thought it’d be like!”

“It’s kind of squishy, but the more I chew it, the more I can taste the soup! It’s got a kind of elasticity that reminds me of meat...!”

Right?! That’s the best part about shiitake mushrooms!

In my past life, high-quality shiitake were called shiitake steaks! I even had one once. I roasted one side with soy sauce and butter and ate it that way... I could use cheese for flavor, too, or roast it in the oven with mayonnaise... *Wait, this isn’t a story about shiitake cuisine!*

A-Anyway, this should meet Mister Jilril’s demands! I added more soup stock and put the udon in it, cooking them together.

“Something smells nice!”

Oh, the smell lured Mister Jilril over. It’s not evening yet, so what do we do? The pot’s almost done, and we’re all in one place.

“Yes, it’s nice and ready!”

“Oh, it’s ready this soon?”

“Yes, but there’s still time until the hot pot party can begin.”

“Mm? What do you mean?”

I looked up at Dad. *What do we do? Do we start eating? It’s still early.*

“Moving dinner up once in a while isn’t a crime. We’ve only got one guest here tonight, after all.”

“Yay! Then let’s start eating!” Nakona cheered.

“Now, now, Nakona. We can’t start eating before the guest does. What do you say, Mister Jilril? Would you mind if we eat a bit early?”

“Yes, well, I think eating outside at this time of day can be pleasant every once in a while. Eating while hearing some tales of the Azure Demon Wolf of De Marl’s heroism might be a fine way to pass the time.”

“*Ugh!* Could you spare me from that? I’m not fond of talking about old times,” Dad groaned.

“Ahaha, that’s a shame.”

“Why? I want to hear stories from when you were a knight, Daddy!” Nakona protested.

“Me too!” I joined in.

It wasn’t often that Dad talked about his past! *Stories about wars are kind of scary, so I don’t like hearing detailed descriptions of battle, but... I want to hear about the demi-human continent!*

It has elves and dwarves, and the dwarves have earthen pots! Who knows, maybe the demi-human continent had pressure cookers, chopping tools, fridges...and something like electronics...!

Okay, probably not that.

But since the mythical continent was said to be a treasure trove of mysterious materials, the demi-human continent might be home to all sorts of curious ingredients! Plus, my image of dwarves had them wielding impressive technology! Maybe they could make Dad a more efficient prosthetic arm...

Of course, if I make the supreme tonic, we won’t need that anymore.

“Mm? What’s this white, stretchy thing at the bottom?” Mister Jilril asked.

“Oh, that’s udon! It’s made from mixing flour with a little salt and water that you then cut into strips.”

“It’s quite delicious.”

“Making it is really hard!” Nakona piped up. “I spent a long time beating it into shape, so you better relish it!”

“B-Beating it into shape...? *Ahem!* Well, I suppose I should have some more, then!”

Ahaha, *“beat it into shape” sounds scary. Makes sense he’d be weirded out. Not that she’s wrong!*

Mister Jilril dipped his fork into the bottom of the pot, scooped

up some udon noodles, and—much to my horror—carried it right up to his mouth.

That's bad manners! You're supposed to slurp them!

We all watched him with stiff smiles. *His insistence... No, his obsession with hot food is impressive.*

“...Mm, that hits the spot! It really *does* burn my lips and tongue.”

“...I tried making the burn medicine you taught me yesterday. Do you want some?”

“Much appreciated.”



THE next morning, Mister Jilril handed me a bag full of seeds while having breakfast at the coffee corner.

“What’s this...?”

“Gondelz seeds. Find a tall, moist spot in a Hihi tree, and plant them in a hole there. It should be ready to harvest six months later.”

“Oh, thank you...”

This is something that I don't have the first idea how to use.

“Incidentally, if you use the pot I gave you to dry a Gondelz and make it into a fine powder, you can make even better soup stock out of it.”

“Ah!”

Dried shiitake soup! Right, you can use shiitake for soup stock, too! So that's one use for these seeds!

“Th-Thank you!”

“Heheh, I’m glad you catch on quick. If you come to Saikorea, I can teach you all kinds of other things, but...”

“...I’m sorry. I like it here.”

“I understand. Well, if you change your mind, come anytime. I’ll be sure to be generous with your scholarship. Would you mind if I take your ideas and have a restaurant for potted udon opened in Saikorea?”

“G-Go ahead!”

I just hope Mister Jilril can find a chef and an investor who actually understands his weird food preferences...

♣My Daughter and Her Little Sister

THAT day, I climbed Mount Rofola with Nakona. Some boars had been laying waste to our fields, so we decided it was time to thin them out a bit. I preferred to live peacefully with the woodland creatures whenever possible, but we had our own livelihood to consider.

Boars have a keen sense of smell, so even if you lay a trap, they know to avoid it if it reeks of humans. To allay that, we used a powder Tina made from dried fish entrails to blot out our smell from the traps. It stank, but the boars around these parts were drawn to the odor of Lake Rhiole's fish. (Maybe it won't work on boars in other regions, though. Who can say?)

We went to check on a trap we set in the boars' territory, when we found...

"There's one there!"

"It's huge. It gouged out the nearby trees."

The trap we set involved connecting iron wires to the trees, which formed a circle that enclosed its target when they stepped into it. The boar we'd caught was one massive critter, standing ten feet tall.

"Say, Daddy, can I use it to practice my new technique?"

"Uhh, ah, erm, sure?"

She says some pretty brutal things without a second thought...

Hmm.

I turned around and found Nakona already pouncing on the boar. It may have been tied up, but it was still a large male. Charging it like that...just who did Nakona take after? Even in my knight days, I'd think twice before being this reckless.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! Two-stage Axe Kick!"

A two-stage Axe Kick with mana filling her limbs. Whoa. Gruesome.

The male boar faced Nakona, intending to meet her challenge, but the intense kick knocked it down, where it frothed at the mouth.

She just defeated it in one blow, single-handedly...

"Hm, I missed a little, but...yeah, there's an opening when I land! After an ax kick, I can just use the momentum to somersault and link it to another ax kick!"

I looked at her silently.

Gods of De Marl, how horrifying my daughter has become.

"L-Let's drain out the blood and cut it open."

"Okay!"

Anyway, it having fainted gave us a safe chance to kill it. I don't know if this boar was behind ruining our poor fields, but with a body this large, it probably had an appetite to match. Not having it around would increase the amount of food left for other animals.

And we had the side benefit of getting some extra meat, too. The problem was...this big guy was, well, a guy. And during mating periods, males fought each other over females, so the muscles around their shoulders and forelegs hardened, making those parts rather inedible. Plus, they let off pheromones to attract females, so they reeked.

"Phew... With this much meat, we'll need to make a few trips. Let's rest."

"Yeah, let's! We can have the lunch Tina made us."

"Sure."

Nakona opened the basket she'd brought. It had sandwiches made with fresh vegetables and roast chicken. Eating next to a corpse would be a bit gross, so we sat down a short distance away. Still, Tina sure was getting better with making all sorts of dishes.

"...By the way," Nakona suddenly spoke up.

"Hm?"

"You adopted Tina, right, Daddy? Are Tina's real parents really dead?"

"What...?! D-Did Tina tell you that?"

"Huh? Yeah. She said that's the impression she gets..."

Oh...is that right? I guess Tina has things she won't share with me but would talk to Nakona about.

"...Daddy?"

"Oh, er... Come to think of it, I never did tell you how I met Tina. I was on my way back from the battlefield, after I lost my arm, and they decided to dismiss me..., I began, telling Nakona all about that time.

I was devastated after my ex-wife left me and took Nakona

with her, and in my despair, I suffered a painful defeat in battle. Looking back on it now, I feel pathetic. While I was sitting in that carriage, wallowing in self-pity, a Mythical Beast—an unusual sight on the human continent—showed up in front of us.

Yes, that was a Mythical Beast. It reacted to my words. It was the first time I saw one... Mythicals are by far the strongest race in the world. Greater than any human. They have high intellect, mana, and vitality, and their strength would allow them to ruin a country in a single night.

That's why, in terms of threat, they were more dangerous than even monsters. And that kind of creature entrusted *me* with a baby—Tinaris.

"A Mythical Beast led you to her...? So Tina is half-human, half-Mythical Beast?"

"Mm...I don't know about that. It does look like she has inhuman blood in her...but I think she's trying to hide that."

"But her long ears are conspicuous. I think she's growing out her hair to hide them... I mean, *we* don't mind. But not everyone will feel that way."

"Long ears, good with using mana, blond hair with red tips... I guess an elf comes to mind before anything..."

"An elf, huh? So, if she's half-human, that means she's like that Sirius guy."

"Assuming she is an elf, yeah. But half-elves have their own cities on the demi-human continent. Plus, elves are called the people of the forest, and they don't have red eyes. Same for half-elves."

"Mmmm," Nakona murmured pensively. "Then...just what is Tina supposed to be?"

"I don't know..."

I'd tried looking into what race Tina might be. My investigations came up short, though. *And I can't help but think that, even if I do find out who her real parents were, that might not make her any happier. Most parents don't abandon their children for no reason, and the fact that she was left with a Mythical Beast only makes everything stranger.*

Maybe she isn't a demi-human? But if she isn't, why would a Mythical Beast leave the Mythical Continent to discard their child?

Or maybe...the Mythical just ran into this baby and decided to find parents that would take care of it...?

“Well, we won’t find out the truth just by thinking about it.”

“I guess. It doesn’t matter what race she is or what her story might’ve been, Tina’s the youngest Ril child just the same.”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

In the end, this doesn’t change anything, and my tasks remain the same. I’ll raise Nakona and Tina until they’re adults and keep them safe until they find a partner I can entrust them to.

“All right, let’s get back to work, then.”

“Yeah!”

Until then, it’s my duty to protect them as a father.

♣Me at Age 10

THERE, it's ready! Hehe, I've gotten better at baking, if I do say so myself!

Cooking does become easier as you get older and taller. Especially when it comes to the oven...though I admit I wouldn't have known how to put firewood into a stove and cook off the residual heat if I didn't see a movie about a certain witch's delivery service in my past life.

"...Looking good. So, now that I've made some gratin, what should I try making next?"

"Morning, Tina!" Nakona approached me. "Breakfast smells good. What're you making?!"

"Good morning, Nakona! Today, I put maforoni, demi-glace sauce, and cheese inside a poteto... Erm, it's called... Ah, I'll call it gratin!"

"Oooh! That sounds tasty. I'll call Daddy over!"

"Sure, thanks."

Nakona Ril came to our inn four years ago after running away from De Marl in displeasure over her mother's remarriage. By now, she'd completely taken to her role as my stepsister and as a member of the inn. She's nimble, vigorous, and a strong warrior who clearly takes after her father.

Whenever guests showed up, she would challenge their bodyguards to practice matches. Before long, our inn got a somewhat dubious reputation as "That inn with the really strong bodyguard girl..."

O-Of course, we still have plenty of other good selling points! Gorgeous views, a hot spring, tasty, creative cuisine, and high-quality medicine for sale. The rumors spread and we got more guests. Rumors about Nakona seemed to stand out, though, as far as the inn was concerned...

I mean, having bad guys stay away from our inn is a good thing!

"Tina, you got some letters," Dad said, walking into the inn.

“Oh, welcome home, Dad. Letters? For me? Who are they from?”

“Lico and Mister Jilril.”

“Ah!”

Mister Jilril was one of our inn’s past guests and the chairman of a school in the scholar country of Saikorea! He was a friend of Sirius, an archaeologist and a member of Aaron’s adventurer group, who was also our occasional guest.

Sirius was the one who praised my talent as an alchemical apothecary and mage. Apparently, he told Mister Jilril about me when he went to Saikorea, making him want to meet me in person.

Mister Jilril was a very nice, polite gentleman who had an odd fixation with food hot enough to burn his tongue. He really seemed to like the dishes I made based on my past life... He was so enthusiastic about my udon that he still sent me letters every now and then.

Lico was an old colleague of Dad’s and a state alchemist for the country of De Marl. She had a larger build than Dad and wore imposing, eerie armor when she fought using battle-optimized alchemy. Still, she was effectively my alchemy teacher.

She’d come to rest here at the Rofola Lodge between monster subjugation missions and teach me all sorts of things. As you might expect from a state alchemist, she knew more about making alchemical medicine than I did, even though it wasn’t her field. Compared to her, I wasn’t sure I was really the genius everyone called me.

“Lico wrote she’s coming over soon!” I read out loud.

“Again...?” Dad grumbled.

“Huh?!” Nakona exclaimed excitedly. “So, does that mean Vector and the others are coming too?!”

“According to her letter, people from other knightly orders started joining her missions, so apparently, they are. She asked to reserve a room for six.”

“Yay! This time, I’ll beat Vector silly!”

Dad and I both stared at Nakona.

No, Nakona. That’s not what’s important here...

She looks so cute. So why is she so savage?!

“A room for six, yeah?” Dad asked to confirm. I nodded. “Well, we haven’t used that cottage since Giyaga’s last visit. Guess I’ll spend the day cleaning it out. Tina, you’ll be brewing medicine

today, right? What are you going to make?"

"Of course! I'll be using the ingredients I bought from Miser Giyaga to make a high-grade tonic! I'll keep trying until I get good enough to make ideal ones!"

"But Tina, adventurers don't really buy high-grade tonics. Make too many of them, and they'll just end up in storage."

"Ugh...!" He had a good point there.

"Well, don't worry too much. Giyaga has connections with different military medical facilities and knightly orders all over the world, so maybe he'll find someone to buy it off you... They're just too pricey for the common adventurer..."

...Right. I could make low-grade tonics—healing salves—in pretty large numbers and sell them for a reasonable price. Medium-grade tonics were pricier, but veteran adventurers sometimes bought two or three just to be on the safe side.

But high-grade tonics were more expensive, so adventurers couldn't really afford them. Healing salves cost about two hundred colts, and medium-grade tonics cost two thousand colts. Since high-grade tonics required expensive ingredients, their price jumped to about twenty thousand colts.

Speaking of price hikes, other medicinal ingredients had been becoming more expensive recently. According to Mister Giyaga's informant, the human supremacist country, Edesa Kura, had been buying up all the medicine and medicinal ingredients it could.

Due to that, prices for ingredients that used to be cheap had spiked. Mister Giyaga had been selling me things cheaper as a favor, but the ingredients for the high-grade tonic were very expensive...

It feels like I can't freely practice transmutation like I could before.
Grr...

"Well, I don't think you'll have trouble selling tonics, what with monster attacks being on the rise. The knights will probably buy a high-grade tonic from you in a heartbeat, too... So yeah, if you end up with some spare tonics, I'll have the knights in De Marl buy them off of you."

"Dad?" I called his name, noticing something in his tone was off.

"Hm?"

"...Are you worried about something? Recently, you've been a little..."

"Oh, it's nothing. What did Mister Jilril send you?"

...Huh. He just dodged my question.

But I was interested in Mister Jilril's letter too, so I went along with it.

"Lemme see... Huh?!"

"What's wrong?" Dad asked.

"What does it say?" Nakona peeked at the letter.

"...It says he wants me to send him tonics. As many as possible, even low-grade ones... He says he wants me to accept it as a job. And if possible, he'd like for me to go to their ally, De Marl, and make as many tonics as possible... What happened? Why does he need me to make so many tonics...?"

Dad fell silent.

"...Daddy...does this mean what I think...?"

Nakona looked like she knew something. Dad's expression turned even more severe.

What's happening...? I'm scared...

"It's finally time, huh?" Dad said grimly.

"Time for what?" I asked.

"War's about to start... Edesa Kura's about to launch another war."

I was stunned into silence. A war...

"W-War..."

It just didn't feel real. But the rising prices. The request to mass-produce tonics. Mister Giyaga did sound pretty grave when he said that Edesa Kura was buying things up... That was all happening because everyone was preparing for war.

No, why...?

"This'll be your first time experiencing a war, won't it, Tina...?" Nakona muttered.

"Huh? Oh, y-yes. This isn't your first time, Nakona?"

"Yeah. There was a war going on since before I was born, and it kept going until I was five or six. We always had something to eat because Dad was a knight, but...most of De Marl's citizens struggled for food."

"Knights, senate members, priests, and their families all got rationed food first... No one starved to death thanks to the rationing of course, but...things were pretty awful in the smaller countries that were close to Edesa Kura, like Uru Ki," Dad explained.

It wasn't that I couldn't believe it. It was just hard to swallow that in this world...countries were actively waging war, unlike the country and time I lived in during my past life.

A war is coming...really soon... I don't want that...

"It only took them ten years to gather their strength again..." Dad muttered bitterly.

"And after you and the other knights fought so hard... What's with that stupid country! They piss me off!" Nakona vented in irritation.

"I just hope the lizardmen and ogres don't get provoked into joining the fight... When they get involved, they have a way of not being able to tell who's on their side and who's against them."

"...I see."

Lizardmen and ogres were technically allied with De Marl, but they were among the most belligerent demi-human races. Dad cradled his head with a sullen expression.

Y-Yeah, I understand, Dad. De Marl's fighting to coexist with the demi-humans, so being attacked from behind must suck.

"So, what are you gonna do, Tina?" Nakona asked. "You only spoke with Mister Jilril for a little bit two years ago, so you don't have to care that much about his request."

"Yeah, but...I'll make the tonics. This is a request for a job. I'll have to think before I decide if I go to De Marl or not, but..."

"Yeah, not a bad idea," Dad said. "You shouldn't have to actively take sides."

"Huh?"

"Mm?"

...Dad, weren't you a De Marl knight? Can you really say that?!

"What's with that face you're making? I think it's pretty obvious it's better not to get involved... Edesa Kura wouldn't hesitate to kidnap a skilled alchemical apothecary or alchemist. What if they go after you?"

"If that's the case, wouldn't I be safer making tonics with De Marl's knights around to protect me?"

"Ugh!" Dad panicked. "W-Well, yeah, but...if you take sides blatantly like that, they might try to assassinate you! Countries send assassins to take out skilled people during wars, you know. If they think you're in the way, they might decide to eliminate you. I think an alchemical apothecary is safer taking work from afar."

"...I guess so..."

A former knight really would know all the inner workings of war.

But, as far as safety is concerned...I get the feeling once the war starts, nowhere will really be safe.

“Either way, war is a problem between countries. Edesa Kura’s objective is to dominate the demis and the Mythicals. Strategically speaking, they’re picking an incredibly reckless fight... I’m sure the people in active service will manage...”

Despite saying that, Dad’s expression was terribly embittered. He was clearly vexed, but...I didn’t think it had to do with him being a former knight. Nakona looked much the same.

A war...

I was only ten years old, and these matters “between countries” had nothing to do with me. Right. This was a world I only ever saw on TV... It’s like that question I used to always ask myself: “How could you drag children into your war?!”

“For now, we should get to cleaning that cottage for six,” Dad said, trying to change the subject.

“We should,” I said.

“Huh? Aren’t you going to transmute a high-grade tonic, Tina?”

“Oh, I’ll do that, of course! And I’ll make German Poteto and pizza for lunch, too! I’m gonna work double hard today!”

“G-Good for you?” Dad said, sounding a little baffled.

“Why are you so cheerful all of a sudden?” Nakona asked, blinking with a hint of confusion.

I can’t keep going if I don’t kick things up a notch! Either way, what I need to do hasn’t changed.



TWO years ago, a man called Mister Jirok came from De Lulua to make us a road to the hot spring. He was a construction contractor and used his spare materials to build me my own alchemy workshop. A single room built at the back of the inn!

The shelves on both sides were stacked with potion ingredients, and the room had its own key. There were some dangerous materials in there, after all. It was also equipped with a small underground silo for materials that needed to be stored in

specific moisture and temperature conditions.

I went into that room to brew the high-grade tonic up quick. I collected the result in a big jar and handed it over to Dad for Appraisal.

“Y-You sure made a lot!” he exclaimed, surprised upon seeing the jar.

“I used Condensing! It lets me use as few ingredients as possible for the maximum effect. I figured I shouldn’t waste the ingredients Mister Giyaga sold me. Lico taught me how to do it!”

“H-Huh. Well, I don’t really get it, but it sounds impressive.”

He complimented me without really understanding what I was saying. Typical Dad, I guess...

“Let’s see.”

The excitement...!

“...It’s good quality. So is this one and this one.”

“Nngh!”

I couldn’t make it Ideal after all! It’s so frustrating!

“Well, how’s this? I made it with the last of my ingredients.”

“Let’s see?”

I took out another bottle of medicine from the pouch. It was a bit paler compared to the rest, and there was only enough of it to fit in a small bottle. It was a little weird, actually... I made it with ingredients for a high-grade tonic, but it was a faint pink color, like a low-grade one, and it had something like a layer of gold dust in it. I assumed it was a failure.

Dad Appraised it with his magic and then paused. He looked at it stiffly.

“Dad?”

He tipped it over and examined it from beneath. His expression was kind of funny.

Wh-What? Did I make something that weird? S-Stop making faces like that. Now I’m curious! Aaaah, what does that expression mean?! I wish I could use Appraisal magic too! It’s driving me up the wall!

“...How did you...make this?” Dad eventually asked.

“Huh? How? Erm, the usual way. Like the rest of them...”

“...No, but...I know my Appraisal magic is the lowest possible rank. But...”

“What is it? I’m kind of curious here...”

“...It’s a Supreme tonic... Average quality... That’s what the

Appraisal says. A Supreme tonic... Wh-What are you g-gonna do with it?"

"...Huh? S-Supr— What?!"

We both stared at each other, our faces stiff and our mouths shut. I wasn't sure what to say. Dad's expression turned serious all of a sudden. Very stern. Extremely grave...

Y-Yeah. No! Huh, what? Wait. Erm, huh, what?

"How about we...let Lico Appraise it too?" Dad suggested wearily.

"Y-Yeah!" I nodded desperately.

I carefully, preciousy put the little bottle in my pouch... And I don't remember what I did afterward...



"...IS it just me, or have you two been acting strange recently?" Nakona asked me while I was baking some cookies on the other side of the counter.

S-Strange? Me? Wh-Whatever do you mean?!

"What?" Nakona asked, noticing my silence.

A few travelers were enjoying light meals or dessert on the other side of the counter. We'd recently expanded our coffee corner so that visitors could stop by and relax at the Rofola Lodge even if they weren't staying the night. We left the door open, allowing customers to pick if they wanted to sit at the tables set up on the cottage-style balcony or the small patio ahead of the inn's main building.

And in case someone wanted to spend the night after all, we dedicated a large area near the lake's suspension bridge for camping purposes. This way, even if someone didn't rent a room—like if they only came for the hot springs or just to eat and drink—visitors still had a means of staying at the Rofola Lodge.

Except for the hot springs, which were free, we'd set up fees for the other services we offered. A one-night stay with a meal was 2,500 colts. A stay without a meal was 2,000 colts. A meal was 800 colts, and setting up camp near the lake was 1,000 colts. Etcetera, etcetera. We'd completely revamped our prices this way.

At noon, we prepared lunch. Lunches uniformly cost 500 colts! This was easy money. We procured the ingredients ourselves, and

we'd make lunch for ourselves anyway, so we didn't really spend much money on that. *Heheheh...*

That didn't apply to dessert, though. In this world of Wisty Air, sweets were the sole privilege of the nobility and clergy. They were hardly in circulation among the common folk. So, to that end, sweets cost that much more! 800 colts a serving!

Plus, Mister Giyaga got me some sugar cane seedlings, so I made a sugar cane field that allowed me to transmute sugar freely! Though it took time to cultivate the field. So it wasn't quite that simple...but either way, I had a safe source of sugar!

The power of sweets was impressive... Word got around about the inn, and people were coming to the Rofola Lodge just to try out our dessert. In other words: tourists!

And it was exactly because we were in the presence of such guests that I'd rather they didn't overhear my conversation with Nakona...

"Huh? No way, for real?!" Nakona stared at me with round eyes as I answered her in a hushed whisper.

"That's what Dad's Appraisal said. But it can't be, right? So we'll have Lico reevaluate it."

"G-Good idea. But if it really is the real thing, you really did it! You can cure Dad's arm now!"

"Yeah..."

Seeing the pleased faces of people who'd come from afar to taste my sweets was satisfying. But they never really talked to me... I couldn't have unfamiliar guests from some other country learn about the Supreme tonic. It was too dangerous.

Even without anyone knowing about that particular accomplishment, there were already some weird people who started coming after hearing we sold medicine too...

A Supreme tonic was considered an illusory concoction—no country was able to establish a recipe for making it. It could heal any wound. Reports said it could even recover lost limbs, like Dad's arm. And that naturally gave it the kind of value one couldn't place a price tag on.

And honestly...despite being the one who made it, I didn't know how I created this Supreme tonic. I simply followed the recipe for the high-grade tonic, and I didn't think that could possibly result in a Supreme one.

But if this really is a Supreme tonic, it might be capable of

recovering Dad's lost right arm.

He lost his arm in battle and now he used a wooden prosthetic. Recently, he'd been joking that he's gotten used to using his left hand as if it was his dominant one, but Dad was always right-handed.

"Excuse me, I'd like to buy some medicine." A voice reached us from the other side of the counter.

"Coming!" Nakona called back. "I'll handle it."

"Thanks."

I still had some more sweets to make. That day, I was making a *remoon* and *orenga* pound cake. We had an orchard about half a mile away from the inn. There we grew remoons (lemons), oregas (oranges), apoons (apples), and benans (bananas), among other fruit. Of course, Mount Rofola offered wild grapes and berries, which we also put to use.

Making sweets wasn't a hobby of mine in my past life, but I did help out around the house for lack of anything better to do when I was unemployed. As I did, I learned how to make different desserts, to lessen the load for Mom and treat her to something special... That experience carried over to this life. I felt a bit mixed about it, to be honest.

"Table five, here's your remoon and oregna pound cake."

"Ooh! So this is a cake!"

Yep, they look happy!

We'd been getting more customers, and our income was on the rise. At this rate, we might've been able to have the road to the hot spring serviced soon. Right now, it was only just a dirt road. So far, we'd just cleared the path into more of a road, built up a hot spring, and made dressing rooms for men and women. It was an improvement over how things were a couple of years ago, but it was still quite uncomfortable for the guests.

I was hoping to pave the road with flagstones and build a wall to divide the hot spring. But that meant carrying all those materials up the mountain, and it was pretty steep... There was really no way around it.

And I really wanted to make a café between the inn and the highway! The coffee corner near the lodge's entrance was just too cramped. I also sold medicine over the counter, so that worked out fine, but...

Hm, I wonder how much a café would cost...

“Haa, haa!” A guest stormed inside, visibly out of breath and in quite the panic. “Everyone, run! Bandits!”

“What?”

His words made everyone in the room go pale except for Nakona, who broke into an indomitable smirk.

Ugh... Getting a name for ourselves has its downsides...

Bandits started becoming a frequent problem for us recently. A couple of years back, this never would have happened. The customers often complained that a shop that sold medicine would make an easy target for burglary. But, unfortunately for the bandits...

“Don’t worry!” Nakona called out. “Everyone, please stay here! I’ll go mop them up!”

“Be careful!” I told her.

“I will!” she said with a confident expression.

Honestly speaking, I wasn’t terribly worried about her. In this world, be it magic, alchemy, or battle...or, indeed, just about anything, using mana is the deciding factor. Aaron and Gina once described it in really abstract ways like “bang” and “boom,” but that pretty much summed it up.

And when it came to that kind of mana usage, Nakona was a genius in her own right.

“Gyahaha!”

I heard vulgar laughter.

“Oooh! Look at all these people they’ve got here!”

“All right, boys! Round up the guests and—”

“So, it’s you I have to beat up first!” Nakona said, approaching the bandits while cracking her fists. “It’ll make for a nice warm-up!”

“Huh?!” the bandits all said at once.

I had the guests all take cover inside the inn. It was cramped, but we couldn’t let them get caught up in the fight. They were probably safer here. Looking from afar, it seemed like there were about thirty people... I hoped they had a bounty out on them. Maybe fifty thousand colts a head. We’d be swimming in cash...!

“H-Hey, is that girl gonna be all right out there?” one guest asked me. “I hear there are knights coming this way. Maybe we should look for them...?”

“What, is it your first time here?” another guest interrupted him.

“Yeah, why?”

“We’ll be fine. If anything, we’re lucky.”

“Not often you get to see that spectacle.”

“See what spectacle?”

Our regulars already knew what was coming.

“Dispersing Sixteen-Hit Combo!”

“Gah?!”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The bandits went flying, drawing perfect arcs through the air. It was impressive even for me, with my lack of combat knowledge.

Wow, Nakona’s on a roll today!

She closed the distance between herself and the bandits at once and sent all thirty of them flying with a single barrage. She always looked so elegant when she did that...



“Wow, she’s strong...!” the frightened guest exclaimed.

“Of course she is. Her father’s the Azure Demon Wolf of De Marl, Marcus Ril.”

“S-Seriously?!”

“That girl’s probably stronger than most adventurers.”

“No doubt about that. The fact she can pull off techniques is all the proof you need to know she’s strong.”

...That was apparently the case. I knew techniques as the way one regulates mana when they pour it into a pot or a flask. For knights and high-ranking adventurers, using mana like that results in combat techniques. In layman’s terms, if your body had something like a faucet of mana, techniques are how you used that “water” effectively.

You could connect a hose and narrow the faucet’s mouth to make a smaller amount of water gush out faster. That’s kind of how techniques worked. Using too much can result in mana deficiency, so it’s recommended to learn the mana restoration technique. Unlike us alchemists, though, warriors don’t need to use the technique at the same time as they put their mana to use. That was something I was jealous of.

Of course, knights like Lico who could use the mana restoration technique as they used techniques were considered extremely capable. How much someone can use their techniques depended on their proficiency with the mana restoration technique after all!

Incidentally, most people in this world were terrible at channeling their bodies’ mana, so 80 percent of all adventurers couldn’t really use techniques. Having someone teach you how to use mana cost money, and learning it on your own was hard. As a result, most people just gave up on it.

When someone becomes a knight, they get taught how to channel mana during training, but how well they can use it depends on their instincts, wit, and effort. To that end, the fact Nakona learned multiple techniques at her age meant she really was a genius.

“Hehe, you improved again!”

“Really! You completely stole our thunder, lass.”

The coffee corner suddenly became louder. A group of knights walked into the inn with Nakona, led by someone I knew—a knight

with purplish-blue armor and a skull helmet. Behind her were knights in blue, red, and black armor.

"Knights from De Marl! I can't believe it; all three colors are here!" a young woman exclaimed, excited.

"This is amazing... It's my first time seeing them all together!"

"Hey, isn't that blue knight pretty cute?!"

"Hmm. I like that red knight better."

"They're all good-looking!"

The female travelers chattered among themselves, letting out shrill squeals.

Ah... Yeah, I guess you would feel that way...

"What? Lico, you were this close by?" Nakona asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"We just didn't want to steal your 'prey.' Should we have taken care of it for you?"

"Oh, no, no! I was looking for a chance to put these skills to use, so thanks!"

"Good grief. You're extra energetic today, lass," one of the knights said.

"They're measly bandits. We figured you'd handle them, lass," another knight added.

"Yeah, but it'd be a different story if it was a monster," Lico said grimly.

The first knight, with the purplish-blue armor and the skull helmet, was the hulking Licorice Avide. My alchemy teacher. Her subordinate, the other black knight, was Lysteinn Avide. He was Licorice's cousin's son and another offensive-focused alchemist.

Licorice always said Lysteinn had a "long way to go," but since offensive alchemy wasn't my field, I couldn't really tell. Even when she tried to explain why he wasn't good yet, it all sounded like gibberish to me.

That left the blue and red knights the ladies were squealing about. The blue knight was one of Dad's former subordinates, Gawain. He didn't have a last name yet—meaning he didn't rank high enough for one—but he was a handsome young man with blond hair and green eyes. In terms of looks, he was the very image of a fairy tale prince.

But he was a hard worker and had built his career up from commoner status. Dad acknowledged his efforts. Apparently, when Dad had been a knight, Gawain was still a young squire and

apprentice.

The red knight was Vector Mashid, Gawain's rival in the Crimson Knights. He had a last name as the legitimate son and heir of the noble House Mashid. He had dark skin and ebony hair, giving him more of an Asian beauty that contrasted with the blue-eyed Gawain. Both were incredibly good-looking.

House Mashid was a house of clergymen in De Marl and had been guarding the cathedral to the Gods of De Marl for many generations.

One knight was a commoner, and the other was the heir of a respected family...

Personally, I felt like rooting for Gawain more, but who's to say who's more popular with the ladies?

"Anyway, how about we tie them up and carry them off to Fei Lu? I'd say there's too many to make the trip back to De Marl."

"If it turns out well, we can use them as bait to draw in monsters," Lico said dryly.

"Huh?!"

Almost everyone present exclaimed in shock.

A-Are you serious, Lico? Th-That's dark!

"Bandits get hung in De Marl anyway. No one's gonna care if a few of them die another way. Besides, they chose this way of life. Who knows when they might be eaten by animals or the like?"

"R-Really?" Lysteinn asked. "Don't you think you're being a little too extreme, Lico? If you're gonna use them as monster bait, do it after we pull out all their bones. Their bones at least can become something useful."

"L-Lys?!" Gawain looked at him in shock. "I-I think that's a pretty questionable thing to say too!"

"Alchemists are scary!" one of the guests cried.

Alchemy's reputation is taking a blow...!

Offensive alchemists use skeletons as materials? That is scary!

"H-Hello, Lico!" I raised my voice in greeting. "Hello, everyone! Oh? I thought you reserved a room for six."

I spoke up to stop them from ruining alchemy's reputation further. Everyone in the coffee corner was looking at them with pale faces.

I went outside to escort them to their cottage. Lico's letter mentioned six people, but I only saw four.

"Oh, Tinaris. It's been a while," Lico greeted me. "Yeah, we

reserved it for six. The other two will come later. They picked up some strays.”

“Strays?” I asked.

“What do you mean? Are they okay? Should we go pick them up?” Nakona suggested with a hint of concern.

There have been a lot more wild animal attacks in the area recently.

“They’ll be fine. They’re self-proclaimed adventurers,” Lico waved her hand dismissively.

“Self-proclaimed?” Nakona repeated.

“Adventurers?” I continued after her.

Adventurers should be fine, I guess? But why “self-proclaimed?”

Gawain and Vector snickered for some reason.

“Believe it or not, it’s a demi-human adventurer party,” Gawain explained.

“Demi-human adventurers?!”

“Yeah, they were inspired by human adventurers, so the three of them formed a party,” Lys said. “An elf, a dwarf, and a kobold. They came to the human continent to have an adventure, but they got lost in the forest. So now, our comrades are off to pick them up.”

“So yeah, they’re our demi-human allies on a trip in the human continent, and they don’t know which way is which,” Lico said. “We want to make sure their trip is a good one. Do you happen to have another room for four?”

“I’ll go check!” I exclaimed.

Their story made me really happy. Demi-humans were coming to stay at our inn! It was so exciting! A lot of demi-humans feared and disliked humans because of Edesa Kura’s invasions. But despite that, many merchants and adventurers made their way to the demi-human continent, and through contact with them, some demi-humans decided to become adventurers too.

This is progress! It’s wonderful! We have to show them the best hospitality we can!

I let Nakona handle the bandits outside and went to check the cottages.

And...yes, all the cottages for four are free...! Or rather, the cottages have been rented less and less since we opened the campsite...

After all, while the dirt road leading to it wasn’t the best, the hot springs were a short climb away, and guests only needed to pay

a little for a place to camp. Travelers were used to camping out, so why would they pay extra for a cottage with a roof? Only knights and merchants who wanted to take their time did...

Aah, this isn't how it should be...!

Should we add a toll for the hot springs, after all? But even if we do, we can't tell if someone is gonna just slip inside for a dip without us knowing. We can't keep a constant watch on the place with it so far from the lodge.

"I think we're good on food for that many people too," I noted out loud, when I checked the pantry and everything looked to be in order.

We had our field, orchard, and the lake, and at the back, we had Mount Rofola to forage from. Our food stocks were guaranteed.

Still, demi-human adventurers... I'm looking forward to meeting them!

"Thank you for waiting! We have rooms for everyone," I said as I returned to the main building.

"That's great, thank you. We'd love some food and dessert, if possible. Also, how many tonics do you have?"

"Okay, food and dessert..." I jotted down the request on a memo pad.

Of course, since Lico was a knight captain, she wanted to stock up on tonics!

"My stock right now is twenty-two low-grade tonics, fifteen medium-grade ones, and...eight large bottles of high-grade tonics."

All freshly made this morning...

"Huh...? Did I hear wrong?" Gawain asked me.

"No, it's just... I haven't had time to move them into smaller bottles yet!"

"A-Ah, no, I didn't mean that. I was questioning the eight large bottles of *high-grade* tonic... Are you sure you didn't mean low-grade tonic?"

Oh, that. I thought he meant that large jars are harder to carry around.

"No. Er, Lico taught me how to use Condensing, so I tried it out! And I ended up making more than I meant to..."

"Don't you think you made way too much?!" Lico asked me, surprised.

"Y-You think so...?"

Lico and Lys stared at me, their eyes round with amazement.

Wh-What? Did I do something strange again?

“Yeah, I’d say so. Condensing typically only increases the extra amount by a bit or boosts the quality,” Lys said. “It’s usually a choice between producing in bulk or increasing the quality.”

“R-Really?”

If Lys says so, it must be true. Did I do something wrong then? I thought I just brewed it the way Lico taught me... And I couldn’t even produce any in ideal quality, which was what I was trying to do.

“Maybe you had a lot of ingredients on hand?”

“Erm, in terms of amount, it was the same as what I’d use to get two jars.”

“Th-That’s a lot as it is, but can you really increase the output that much with Condensing, Lico?” Lys asked.

“No, you can’t... Condensing uses alchemy to condense the amount you have to elevate the ingredients’ effects, increasing production efficiency. Making ingredients for two jars last for eight is...unheard of.”

“I-It is?”

That’s strange? Did I do something wrong after all? Lico, my alchemy teacher, is saying what I did shouldn’t be possible, so I must have done something wrong.

“But put another way, if we use Condensing the way Tinaris does, our production rate should skyrocket, too,” Lico added.

“Ah! You’re right!” Lys exclaimed in realization.

“...But I just made it the way you taught me, Lico...”

“Did you do it according to your notes?”

“Y-Yes. And I’ve tried it a few times before, too. I’ve only recently gotten the hang of how to use Condensing...”

I’d failed until this last time and just ended up producing the usual amounts at my usual quality. I’d assumed I finally understood how to do it after rereading the notes I jotted down when Lico taught me the method.

“Captain Licorice, is this Condensing thing some kind of alchemical technique?” Gawain asked.

“Yes, you crush all the ingredients into a powder and mix them together. This lets you reduce the number of ingredients you use by a small percent. And if you use the same amount as usual, it elevates your quality.”

“Huh, but is that really condensing?” Vector asked. “It sounds like you just crush everything into powder...”

"You just don't get it, you two. Ugh! This is why you meathead knights are so useless," Lico huffed. "You have to use alchemy in order to crush ingredients into powder. Powderizing is an advanced alchemy technique, you know? Powderizing ingredients already increases their quality, and when you use those in another recipe, you are using at least double the amount of mana to produce the end product."

"Huh...?" Gawain and Vector exchanged quizzical looks.

These two beefcake knights just don't get it...

What Lico said didn't strike me as that complicated.

"So basically, it means there's a ton of mana put into it?" Nakona tried to simplify it for them.

Well, I guess that's one way of putting it... But it feels like that's oversimplifying things. Or maybe it isn't...?

"That explanation works in layman's terms, but... It's actually kind of complicated," Lys said. "Powderizing takes a long time, and maintaining the right mana amounts is complicated. And you have to recover your mana at the same time, or it fails. The only people in our country who can manage it are Lico and Elysis."

"Well, what she's doing isn't my area of expertise. I can turn things into powder, but I can't make medicine."

I-I mean, that's true, but you don't have to put it so bluntly, Lico...

"I-I see..." Nakona said. "But you really do pull off some amazing stunts like it's nothing, Tina..."

"I failed a lot of times before I could do it."

Besides, I think Nakona makes pulling off some jaw-dropping techniques look easier than it is. Beating thirty bandits in one blow is kind of incredible!

"No, I don't think this is a technique on a level where you can just explain it away with 'I failed a lot before perfecting it,'" Lys said, glancing at me reproachfully.

D-Don't look at me like that. I mean, it was probably something in the flick of my wrist or the like.

"Either way, it's fascinating. Show me how you handle Condensing later," Lico said.

"I-I don't mind. I wanted to show you I can do it, too, so I would have asked you to watch me either way. We can take care of that later. First, let me show you to your room. Nakona, can you close up the coffee corner? It's almost time for lunch to end."

"Right. You got it!"

“Noooo?!” I heard two voices let out shocked cries in unison.

“What’s wrong?”

I turned around, finding the two beefcake knights lying prostrate on the floor.

Huh? What? What’s gotten into those two?

“Don’t mind them,” Lico said. “They made a bet that whoever gets to kill more beasts and bandits on the way here buys the other lunch. Idiots.”

“O-Oh, really...”

Lunch cost less than dinner, after all...



“**LOOKS** like business is booming,” Lico said to Dad after she came back from changing into more comfortable clothes.

“Yeah, thankfully. Tina and Nakona keep coming up with new ideas, so we’re getting more guests... Still, everyone wants to use the campsite, so the rooms aren’t any more occupied than they were before! Ahaha!”

“It’s not funny, Dad,” I chided him.

“That’s right, Daddy. That’s bad news for the inn!”

“Ah, yeah... Sorry...”

An inn where no one stays in the rooms is like putting the cart before the horse. We’d considered reserving the hot spring for guests who rented a room, but it left the same problem as earlier. We can’t tell if someone sneaks into the springs anyway...

Lico was sitting down at the coffee corner, sipping on some tea. She always looked so elegant, like a noblewoman...until she started drinking alcohol, that is.

“By the way, where is that relative of yours and the other two young knights?” Dad asked.

“Hm, they’re off fishing. Apparently, Lys is interested in fishing, and Gawain and Vector are competing to see who can catch the most fish.”

“They’re off having fun and they didn’t call me?!” Nakona pouted, seemingly outraged. “Daddy, I’ll go catch us some fish for dinner!”

“Yeah, you do that.”

So we’re having meunière tonight... Oh well.

“Those demi-human adventurers and the other two knights aren’t showing up, huh?” I said.

“Yeah, but it’s Michael and Kunon we’re talking about here. They’ll be fine.”

“Oh, those two!” Dad nodded. “Yeah, no need to worry about them.”

“Are they strong?” I asked.

These weren’t knights who had visited the inn before. It was the first time I’d heard their names. *If both Dad and Lico vouch for them, they must be really skilled.*

“They sure are,” Dad said. “They’re both heavily armed knights focused on defense. Normally, having that much armor makes you pretty slow, but those guys can move pretty fast. They’re experienced, too. Fought in the war ten years ago.”

“Mm-hm. They’ve got better judgment and skill than those three dolts,” Lico said, jerking her chin in the lake’s general direction.

“I see.”

I can’t argue, considering the first thing they did upon getting to the inn was start playing around to see who can catch the most fish. It’s hard to see them as reliable. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with catching your own meal. And they did pay for it.

“Anyway, you said you needed to talk?” Lico turned her eyes back to Dad and me.

“Yeah... Tina.”

“Yes...”

We put up the “Closed” sign on the door to keep the other guests from coming in, and with Nakona out of the inn, it left just me, Dad, and Lico inside. At Dad’s urging, I took the item in question out of my pouch.

“...Is that...?” Lico gasped.

So, it really is...

“...What do you think?” Dad asked. “If my Appraisal magic isn’t wrong...”

“Y-Yeah. My Appraisal says...”

“Y-Yeah, I guess it is what it is, then. How’s its quality? I saw it’s average.”

“That’s what I saw, too... Where did you get this? Don’t tell me...”

“Y-Yes, erm...,” I said bashfully. “I was making a lot of high-

grade tonics, and I was trying to transmute the leftovers...and it came out strange. It was a little paler, too. I thought I messed up..."

"Then you don't know how you made it...?" Lico asked.

"I just did what I always do. I used Powderized and Condensed ingredients..."

"How many materials did you use?"

"Huh, um..."

I used what was considered a standard amount. I used two-thirds of that with the large jars, but using the standard amount couldn't have been the reason, could it?

"I see... But I've previously seen people use Condensing on a standard amount of materials before. And I don't think the fact it was you doing it that made the difference."

"Yes, I don't think so, either..."

If many famous alchemists used this method before, I couldn't assume the fact I did it was why I produced this result. And besides, if the reason I produced this Supreme tonic laid within me, it meant I could pull it off again if I tried. And then people would be inclined to find out what makes me so special. And that was bad. I didn't want that.

Or maybe I should have people look into what's different about me for once...? No, that's scary...

Closing my eyes, I could imagine it. For some reason, I had this image in my head of Lys approaching me with scalpels in hand and a slasher's grin...

No, no, no, no, no, noooooope!

"Anyway, the best plan for now is for me to watch how you do it a second time. This time, write the quantities and process at every step. If you can establish a method of producing a Supreme tonic, you'd move the world of alchemy to a new stage."

"A-All right! And, um, Lico?"

"What?"

"...Assuming I can establish a recipe for a Supreme tonic, what will alchemical apothecaries aspire to make next?"

"...That'd probably be the Water of Life."

"The Water of Life?"

"It's an illusory concoction. It's also called the Spirit Elixir. It's said to grant eternal life, and only one was ever made long ago. Its creator was the forerunner of alchemy, the Saint Keria Varj. He was blessed by the primal star, Stella, and became an alchemist that

transmuted the Water of Life. It is said he then fell to his knees and offered it to his wife, who refused to take it and decided to live out her lifespan. The stories say Keria Varj then said that if she did not wish for it, leaving it behind would just bring forth conflict, and he spilled it into the bottom of a dry well. It's a well-known legend among alchemists."

I listened to her story in silence. So, this Water of Life was basically an immortality potion? A concoction that heals all diseases sounds like a wonderful thing to me, but the idea of eternal youth and vitality sounds like it really could trigger conflict and wars. I could do without all of that, really.

"You don't look interested in it," Lico pointed out.

"Well, yes, I don't need something like that."

"Heheh, no such greed in you, is there...? Well, with that said, what are you gonna do with this?"

"Ah..."

Right... I wanted to use the Supreme tonic on Dad...

"Um, Dad..."

Dad stood silent.

"...Dad?"

He folded his hands and looked really grave. Actually, no, he looked outright severe. I fell silent and looked up at Dad. Lico gave the Supreme tonic back to me.

This thing can heal his arm. This would be how I repay him for everything. I've always wanted to repay Dad. But...

"Tina... Shouldn't you give that tonic to Lico?"

"Why?" I asked.

"Wh-What?!" Lico looked at Dad wide-eyed.

What is he saying? Give it to Lico? Because De Marl's knights are collecting tonics?

Lico pitched forward, her expression even graver than Dad's.

"I'll be fine," Dad said. "But you're a woman, Lico. I'm sure what happened to your face has been bothering you."

"Ah!" I raised my voice in realization.

Lico scarred the right side of her face during an alchemy accident. The Supreme tonic could heal her face, too...!

"You dolt!" Lico snarled at Dad. "Are you a total idiot, Marcus?! These scars are me reaping what I sowed!"

"You say that, but you could say the same about my arm. No matter how trivial it was, I let my guard down on the battlefield.

But your face has always bothered you. You kept complaining about how those scars are part of why Rondered stopped caring about you."

"Th-That's true, but that's not all there was to it! He'd been giving me the cold shoulder even before that! Wh-Why am I even telling you this?!" she groaned.

"Still, you're better off looking like you did before. If you can fix your face, you'll find another husband. You're a direct heir to House Avide. If you can heal your scars, everyone would want you. Just don't choose your man based on looks this time."

"Wh-Wh-What... What are you— Who are you to even talk about that...?!"

Uh...why's everything taking such a dark turn all of a sudden...? Or, well, I guess they're just overexcited?

Lico rose to her feet and slammed her hands on the table while Dad crossed his arms and grimaced at her.

Uh, um...excuse me?

"Tinaris wanted to make a Supreme tonic for you, Marcus! And you have the nerve—the gall to walk all over your daughter's efforts?!"

"That's not what this is about! Tina's a girl, too. She thinks your face should be healed as much as I do!"

...You could at least ask me, Dad.

I mean, I do agree. If we can heal Lico's face, we should. She's my teacher, after all, and it's thanks to her advice that I even made this Supreme tonic. Even if it was a total coincidence, it was thanks to her guidance. I couldn't have done it without her.

So, I wanted to repay her as my teacher, too. But if I had to pick an order to repay my debts of gratitude, I'd rather repay Dad first. Or so I thought, but when he mentioned marriage...

If we wanted to think about marriage prospects first, maybe it would be better if I let Lico have it first... I don't know how divorced women get treated in this world, but if Nakona's mother was able to get a happily ever after, maybe it's like my past life...

Still, marriage is a once-in-a-lifetime event in a woman's life! Like wearing a dress during a wedding ceremony, kissing the man you love...and in Lico's case, not having half your face burnt off.

I-I want to heal her! I really want to heal her!

It didn't occur to me until then just how terrible her injury was. As a fellow woman, I really wanted to help her! Honestly,

Supreme tonics weren't things I could make that easy, but the rarest ingredient to get for it was Walpurgis herbs, and I could harvest those from the mountain! In fact, it was the only ingredient I didn't need to buy from Mister Giyaga.

If I just need to repeat the process, Dad might just have to wait for the next time...

But the Supreme tonic is an illusory concoction. Who knows if I can produce it a second time...?

"You big fat idiot! And you called yourself the Vice-Captain of the Azure Knights!" Lico continued hurling insults at Dad.

"What...?" Dad started to reply, but she cut him off.

"If the people of De Marl see I healed my face, they'll know someone made a Supreme tonic! And if that happens, the Ebony Knights and the Senate will call Tinaris to De Marl! And as nice as it might sound on the surface... Did you truly lose your wit that badly, Marcus Ril?!"

"That's..."

"But if you restored your arm, who would notice?! No one would care if the owner of some off-road inn grows back his arm, would they? Don't you see? My face...I can hide that behind my armor! I'm a knight! An alchemist! I cast away any ideas of womanly joy and happiness a long time ago!"

"And I'm telling you I don't like that!" Dad slammed his right hand on the table this time and rose to his feet.

This made Lico visibly recoil.

I had some mixed feelings about him hitting the desk like that... *At least use your prosthetic arm! That way, it won't hurt...*

But that wasn't what really bothered me. Dad was upset. I'd only seen him act like this and raise his voice when Nakona and I were in danger, but this felt completely different from that. Dad—no, Marcus didn't have a father's face on. This might have been the first time I'd seen that...

"You use it!"

"I refuse! I won't use it for a whole slew of reasons! But more than anything, I refuse to waste Tinaris' efforts!" Lico asserted.

"If you're just going to hide your face behind your bangs and helmet, you might as well use it!"

"I keep telling you, that's not the problem here!"

H-Hey, why are you two pushing it onto each other like that?

They faced off and...started playing rock-paper-scissors to

decide who gets it. Which might come as a surprise, but it was actually because I taught people about the game, and it soon spread throughout De Marl. It quickly became an easy, peaceful way to resolve arguments.

“Best of three!”

But no matter who started it...

“Best of five!”

It didn't look...

“Best of seven!”

...like anything would actually get resolved.



THE following day, I was sweeping the entryway while Dad and Nakona were off hunting a boar on its way back to its den. As I was busy cleaning, I noticed a knight approach the Rofola Lodge. I stiffened for a moment, wondering if I'd seen something wrong.

...I-Is that a ghost? Wait, maybe not...

It was a tall soldier in white and blue armor. Seeing that imposing figure walk out of the fog, I leaned my broom against the staircase railing and hurried over to greet them.

“Good morning! Are you part of Lico's group?”

“Indeed. I am Kunon, vice-captain of the Azure Knights' fifth unit. Where can I find Licorice, captain of the Ebony Knights?”

“Let me escort you to her.”

I wasn't sure why they were alone. The knight had a feminine voice, but I couldn't see their face or expression behind their helmet. Their white and blue armor and shield were filthy, though. Their business sounded urgent...

“Excuse me, I heard there was supposed to be another knight and some demi-human adventurers with you...?”

“...I suppose it only makes sense someone from the inn would be well-informed about their guests.”

“Is something wrong?”

M-Maybe I shouldn't have asked her about them?!

I glanced up at Kunon with concern, only to find her removing her helmet. She had dark, almost tanned skin and dried-out ebony hair tied into a ponytail.

Huh...? She kind of reminds me of someone...

"I suppose it would also make sense for you to partake in our discussion, then. There's been something of a complication."

"I-I see..."

I led her over to the cottage for six Lico was staying in. Everyone was out of their armor and clad in casual clothing...one of them was even curled up under the covers, happily snoozing away. It was still early in the morning, after all.

"Get up, you oaf."

"Ngh?!"

"Whoa?!" I exclaimed as Kunon literally smacked Vector awake with her shield.

Lico, Gawain, and Lys simply greeted me with a casual "Good morning, Tinaris," as if this was somehow a regular occurrence.

W-Won't that kill him?!

One gruesome story from my past life came to mind—during one of my school field trips, someone was stepped on while in their sleeping bag, which made an internal organ rupture...killing them. Wouldn't a shield do worse damage than a foot?!

"E-Erm..." I stuttered, my eyes darting toward Vector.

"Oh, don't worry about him. Kunon was holding back," Lico said off-handedly.

"Forget about him, Kunon. Where's Michael?" Gawain asked.

Vector got up in a coughing fit, murmuring a muffled "Cut me some slack, Sis... G'morning to you, too" grumpily. Like I assumed, she was his sister...!

I did think they looked alike!

"Mm, yeah, I came to deliver word to you, since the situation's changed," Kunon said. "Apparently, they had one more companion."

"What? So there's four of them?"

"The kobold warrior said they simply didn't trust human knights, so they didn't tell us right away. I suppose we can't fault them for that..."

"Of course. So, what about that fourth member?"

"Apparently, they got separated from the rest in the forest. They're of the wingedfolk and flew off... Michael and I realized we wouldn't be enough to search for them."

"True, monsters do appear around these parts..."

It really did feel like a conversation between knights. Long

story short, there were a total of four demi-human adventurers, but one of them got separated from the rest of the group, and the others ended up lost in the forest while looking for him. Lico and her knights tried to help them find their way, but they didn't trust humans enough to let them know they weren't just lost but also looking for someone. They decided to search for their missing friend on the way to the inn but eventually gave up and told Kunon about it.

Mm-hm... They're problematic in their own way, aren't they...?

"How about we have the former Vice-Captain show us the way?" Gawain suggested. "I'd assume Sir Marcus is familiar with the land here. Asking for his help would be the wisest course of action."

Lico furrowed her brows at his suggestion. Her subordinates all jolted in fright, their expressions hardening. *I can understand why they're scared of her glare... It's pretty menacing.*

"...Um, if you don't mind, I could show you around," I offered. "I live here too, and I go to gather ingredients in the forest a lot, so I know my way around."

"Y-You? But we can't ask a little girl like you to help us..."

"It'll be fine. Working in the field is my only chore for today, anyway."

Lunch time and dessert were usually prepared within one hour, although I did like to have two hours for it...but since today's dessert was apoon pie, I didn't need as much time. I'd prepared the batter for the pie and the apoons yesterday—after I left Dad and Lico, who wouldn't stop arguing—so I had it all ready. It just needed to be wrapped and baked.

I could have Nakona warm the oven for me, and that way, I'd just need to bake it. All that'd be left to do is cut it up so we can serve it to the guests, and Dad and Nakona can handle that.

"Your chores aren't the problem..."

"And I've been meaning to go look for Walpurgis herbs!" I added.

"Walpurgis? What's that?"

"Herbs you can use to make high-grade tonics. They're very rare! If you want to buy them, you won't find them for less than ten thousand colts!"

"Ah! Really?!" Lys exclaimed.

Of course, you'd know about it, Lys. Walpurgis herbs are precious

to alchemists!

His eyes shined visibly as he scrambled to his feet and approached me, his attitude quite different from before.

“Please! Let me come with you!”

“Lysteinn...” Lico eyed him with exasperation.

“But Lico, we’re talking Walpurgis herbs here! Fresh ones are so hard to come by!”

“They are, but...”

For all her complaints, it looked like Lico realized she couldn’t stop Lys at this point...

Honestly, I didn’t know what kind of alchemy Lys was researching, but it was probably for much more dangerous purposes than what I used it for...

“I could make a fusion bullet that goes right through the enemy’s armor and melts their flesh!”

That’s even darker than I thought. How can he say stuff like that with a smile?!

“Didn’t I tell you to develop anti-monster bullets?!” Lico chided him.

“Huh? Oh yeah, right, yes, anti-monster bullets, yeah,” Lys said, still smiling like a dork even after Lico scolded him.

...Anyway, it was settled that I would be going with them!



AFTER eating a quick breakfast, everyone put on their armor. In preparation for the trip to the forest, I brought a pouch for storing the ingredients I’d gather and my personal medicine pouch.

The medicine pouch was stuffed with four high-grade tonics, three low-grade tonics, two antidotes, and two potions for abnormal conditions. Inside the ingredient pouch, I stashed my gathering gloves, pincers, and several empty bottles.

I left the apoon pie in Nakona’s care. Now I was all set to go. While I was giving directions to Nakona, everyone else noticed the tense air between Dad and Lico and guessed they must have argued about something.

“...Say, Tina, do you know why they fought? Were they drinking or something?” Nakona asked me.

“No, they weren’t drinking...”

I knew the reason, but couldn't mention it while the other knights were around. Nakona looked pretty worried, since she'd hardly ever seen Dad act upset. It's just that, erm, how do I put it... it's pretty complicated for me, too. Both of them are right in what they say, but...

"Well, I don't know if this is so much an argument as it is...a lovers' spat, I guess?" I said.

"A lovers' spat...?"

"Yeah, it's like... They fought because they both really care about each other."

Nakona looked shocked. I didn't mean it in a romantic sense, so maybe calling it a lovers' spat was misleading. Lico was worried about both my own and dad's well-being, while Dad was worried about Lico's life and feelings as a woman...

I felt both of them were right. They weren't mad for selfish reasons...but sadly, we only had one Supreme tonic.

Dad was missing his arm, while Lico lost half her face. Only one of them could use it, and they kept pushing it on the other person.

"...What does that mean?" Nakona asked, out of the loop.

"Well, they're both pushing their kindness onto each other."

"O-Oh..."

Nakona seemed to catch onto the gist of it, one way or another. It made sense, all in all. Dad and Lico were really alike. They were both kindhearted, hardheaded, and sore losers, probably owing to exactly what called them to be knights in the first place. Put another way, they were both kind of a mess.

"You'll probably be fine with the knights, but don't walk too far ahead of them or fall behind because you get engrossed in gathering ingredients," Nakona cautioned. "Wouldn't want you to get lost, you hear? You're their guide, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I know."

Nakona could be a bit of a worrywart sometimes. Meanwhile, Dad was still crossing his arms and glaring back at Lico. I figured we should leave as soon as we could to break this tension.

Having those two in such a foul mood seemed to negatively affect the other knights.

"Let's get going!" I piped up. "By the way, Kunon, where did you last see the demi-humans?"

"H-Hmm, I think it was slightly southwest of the inn. In a

forest at the foot of the mountain.”

Mount Rofola was to the west, while Lake Rhode was to the east, with the inn sitting right between them. Rofola Lodge was at the foot of the mountain, with forest on both sides.

Heading south would lead you to a road to the highway, and the southern forest was on the side of that road. Nakona got lost there once, and that’s where we met Lico fighting a monster.

Still, the southern forest was comparatively safer of the two. The northern forest was over twice its size and that much more complex. I more or less knew my way around the southern forest, but the northern forest sprawled all around the mountain. Even Dad probably didn’t know everything there was to know about it. I honestly couldn’t imagine getting lost in there...

“Okay. Let’s just go there for now,” I said.

And so, I made my way into the woods, accompanied by five knights. While the southern forest was nowhere near as large as the northern one, it was still pretty vast. Plus, in this world, borders weren’t really drawn out, so it was hard to tell whose territory you were in.

“We shouldn’t just wander around randomly looking for them,” I said. “You said they were on the eastern side of the southern forest, right? How about we look around the southern areas of the forest first?”

“Agreed. We can split the southern forest into four areas and start by thoroughly searching the southeastern corner,” Lico consented. “Yes, let’s go with that.”

At her approval, we set out to regroup with Michael and the four demi-human adventurers. Our plan was to break up into groups and thoroughly search each part of the forest, while staying within earshot of each other.

This’d be so much easier with a smartphone...

Another thought then crossed my mind.

“What’s wrong, Tinaris?” Lys asked, noticing my gaze.

“Oh, erm, I was just wondering, what kind of alchemy do you and Lico research?”

Lys’s research didn’t look like it was meant for anything good, but stuff like microwaves and cell phones were originally military technology modified for civilian use too. In which case, maybe their technologies could be adapted for general uses as well. Like, maybe they’d end up making a cell phone, or a microwave oven, or an

electric kettle, or a gas cooker? I asked him about it anticipating something along those lines, but...

"What, you're interested in alchemical weapons?" Lys asked me.

"N-Not in weapons, no."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Even if you were, I wouldn't tell you. Sorry. No alchemist alive would share their research with another one."

"Ugh..."

Yeah, that makes sense. But wait, I told Lico a lot about my work, didn't I?!

"Besides, the things Lico and I work on are military affairs, so we're sworn to confidentiality."

"I-I see."

That felt like a fairly obvious and justifiable reason not to tell me.

"But I can probably share a little about this. I think I mentioned a bit about it to you before."

"Ah, yes, you've told me about it once..."

Lys showed off the two guns attached to his arms. In this world, they are called an Air Gun. As the name may imply, they were similar to Earth's guns and were powerful enough to blow someone's head off. Lico had a similar weapon, except it packed greater firepower and could blow a person's torso off.

These guns were meant as anti-monster weapons, but if used during wartime, they would likely become weapons of mass murder. Lys started explaining how it had some mechanism or another in place to curb the recoil, but I couldn't understand what he was talking about. Everything he said went in one ear and out the other.

I can do without using this thing to make a phone or a microwave, thank you very much...

"But that's a weapon, right?" I asked. "It's not exactly alchemy; it's just technology you developed and engineered..."

"Well, that's true for the exterior... You wanna hear about the interior?"

"No, that's fine. I wouldn't understand even if you explained."

I didn't really care for its structure, more about the Air it used to form its bullets... But that was probably confidential.

Guess I'll give up on it. I really wanted to have a microwave,

though... Getting firewood for the oven is really annoying...

As we talked about alchemy, we reached a campsite Michael and the demi-human adventurers had set up. It was on the bank of a small river that flowed into Lake Rhiode, and there were four tents set up there.

W-Woow! There really are demi-humans here! This is my first time seeing them!

“Michael!” Kunon jogged over to a knight in red armor, faster than I could ever imagine her heavy gear would allow her to.

“Kunon!”

...Huh?

“I’m sorry I’m late!”

“You’re not late... So long as you’re safe, everything’s fine.”

“Michael...”

...Huh? Oooh? Er? What?

“Erm, e-excuse me?” I stuttered, at a loss.

Kunon always struck me as so cautious and taciturn, but as she flipped up her helmet to face the other knight, she had the expression of a blushing maiden. She approached him, after which they embraced and held hands, staring lovingly into each other’s eyes all the while.

I turned to look at Vector, her younger brother, in disbelief, and he simply grinned at me.

“Yeah, Michael is Kunon’s fiancé.”

“R-Really? But, they’re in different knight orders...”

“Yeah, they have different colors, but they’re both knights of De Marl.”

“C-Cool.”

I was under the impression that the Azure and Crimson Knights didn’t get along too well. Maybe they just got along because they were both heavily armored knights? But still, they could be together even if their colors were different...it was a heartwarming sight.

“Ahem!” Lico let out a loud, dry cough.

“Ah!” The happy couple jolted.

Sure, it was heartwarming, but they were still supposed to be working. Us and the demi-humans all stared coldly at them.

...Oh yeah, it was just the two of them helping the demi-humans search before we came. The demi-humans probably had to watch them be clingy like this the whole time... I can’t believe they

took advantage of their superior not being there to do something like that...!

“O-Our apologies, Captain!”

“No, it’s fine. Anyway, I’ve heard of your circumstances from Kunon, demi-human adventurers. I have a suggestion...”

Lico’s words made everyone tense up. The demi-humans listened in to her suggestion as to how to find their missing friend. Two of them, an elf boy and a dark-skinned boy, were nodding as she spoke. But the kobold boy looked so bored, even I could easily notice it.

“This here is Tinaris. She’s the innkeeper’s daughter of the lodge we were supposed to go to and an alchemical apothecary. She offered to join us as a guide.”

“Ah, nice to meet you all.” I bowed my head at Lico’s introduction.

“Tinaris?” one of the demi-humans asked, prompting me to look up.

“Hm? Yes?”

“So you’re that genius kid the old man wouldn’t shut up about,” the boy with elf ears remarked. “Hm, you’re not too bad, but... No good. You’re as flat as a board, front and back. How old are you?”

“E-Excuse me?!”

Wh-What is he saying?!

I couldn’t believe how rude he was being to me! He had glasses, green eyes, and blond hair with green tips. He wore a long jacket that was too big for him. The sleeves extended longer than his fingertips. His pants were weirdly shaped and had stitches in what looked like set intervals. He was carrying a book big enough to hide his entire upper body under his arm.

“Oh, I guess I forgot to introduce myself. Sorry about that. I’m Shida, 37th Prince of the Elven Empire of Forestria! My mother is the 19th princess, and my father has no claim to the throne since he’s a half-elf. That’s enough to clarify who I am, yes? I said my father called you a *genius*. You understand who I am now, yes? Right?”

“...So, you’re Sirius’s...”

“Hahaha! Exactly!”



I fell into shocked silence. *Sirius has a kid like this?! But wait, Sirius still comes to visit every now and then...*

"E-Erm, didn't Sirius say you were over fifty years old...?"

I was curious about him being an imperial prince, but there was a much more pressing matter than that. This elf boy looked slightly younger than me. Or, well, I guess his clothes were the right size for that age? But his overbearing attitude aside, he looked like a seven or eight-year-old kid.

"I'm turning fifty-one this year, yes...but in elf terms, I'm still pretty much a youngling."

...Is he for real?!

Either way, I'm not going to consider marrying Sirius's son now. I'm sorry, Sirius, but I'm going to have to politely—if *not sternly*—refuse.

"I'll introduce meself too, then! Me name's Ledo. I'm a dwarf. I'm good at buildin' things. A pleasure to meet ya, Tinaris!"

"And the pup sulking over there is Sierro, a kobold," Shida gestured toward the kobold. "He's the largest one in the group, but he's the youngest among us. He's only thirteen."

"Ayup, for how I look, I'm at the chipper age of twenty-eight!" Ledo appended merrily.

"Still young for a dwarf, though," Shida remarked.

"Guess that makes you the only adult here, Shida!"

"Ahahahahahaha!" The two of them laughed in unison.

...I get the feeling neither of them really listens to what other people say.

Ledo the dwarf wore green overalls, and the only one dressed in an adventurer's attire was Sierro.

"A pleasure to meet you," I nodded toward him.

"Hmph," Sierro simply scoffed at me and looked away in an exaggerated fashion.

What an annoying kid.

Honestly, none of these adventurers struck me as particularly pleasant.

"Do you have any objections to the method I've suggested?" Lico asked them.

"I don't. If my search magic and Sierro's nose don't work, the only thing that's left is to rely on numbers."

"Still, still! I never thought your magic wouldn't work, Shida!"

Ledo chirped.

“Neither did I!” Shida, by contrast, grimaced in displeasure. “I’ve heard the Air on the human continent was impure, but I didn’t think it’d be outright gone over such a wide area. It’s so unexpected, I can’t help but laugh! Ahahaha!”

“Magic...”

Right, Sirius did tell me the demi-human continent’s Air was purer than here. Since humans worshiped multiple gods, it caused the Air on this continent to become muddled...and that influences magic.

“But what do you mean, Sierro’s nose isn’t working...?” I asked.

Sierro was a kobold. Kobolds were canine beastmen. Feline beastmen were called catbolds, by the way, and rabbit beastmen were called rabbibolds. Apparently, canine kobolds were originally called dogbolds, but people tended to colloquially call all carnivore beastmen “kobolds.” Honestly, I couldn’t really tell them all apart.

What do you call an animal that’s between a carnivore and an herbivore?

Either way, they were probably different from the image I had of kobolds in my past life. Dogbolds were famous among the different kobold variants as having an exceptionally good sense of smell.

So wouldn’t Sierro be able to track their missing friend by his smell? Why couldn’t they find him, then?

“Hmph,” Sierro grumbled. “Turns out Kuula doesn’t have a scent.”

“H-Huh? He doesn’t have a scent?”

“Maybe it’s because he’s not a normal birdbold. Apparently, he smells like the wind!” Ledo said.

“They smell like the wind...?” I repeated.

That makes even less sense. And what does he mean, he’s not a normal birdbold? How are we supposed to find him, then?

“By the way, does your missing friend have any distinctive traits besides being a birdbold?” Gawain asked Ledo. “Something he wears or the color of his wings?”

“He does! Kuula’s wings are white! His hair is blue like the sky, his eyes are blue too, and his clothes are white! And he has a ring floating over his head!”

Gawain stiffened at that description.

Don't freeze up! You're the one who asked him...!

Not that I couldn't relate.

He has a what over his head? A ring?! Did I hear that right?

White clothes, blue hair and eyes, a ring over his head... For how simple the description was, that last piece of information was a pretty distinctive point.

"Erm, Lico...do birdbolds usually have rings over their heads?" I asked.

"None of the birdbolds I met on the demi-human continent had any rings over their heads, no."

"He's a strange fellow," Shida said. "He doesn't remember where he came from, or anything except his name, for that matter. He's weird."

"What? He has no memories...? I'm surprised a prince of Forestria let someone so suspicious travel with them."

"Ahahaha! Well, I had my ulterior motives, of course! I thought he looked cute and pretty, so I figured I'd make a move on him during our adventures. Had to give up once I realized he was a man from his way of speaking!"

I thought Shida counted as the cute type in terms of appearance too, but what he'd said made me realize I was dealing with a real creep despite his childish looks.

I guess you can't judge elves by their appearance, I concluded to myself sagely. *Like...at all...*

I could just tell that Lico's expression was the same as mine under her helmet.

"A-Anyway, let's look for someone who fits that description," she said. "Split up into groups of two and search around a fifteen-foot radius in all directions. Once Tinaris says the word, make a U-turn and go back to the inn. After lunch, we'll scan the northern area of the forest using the same method."

"Yes, ma'am!" the knights nodded, their attitudes shifting to work mode.

They split up into teams of two and spread out around Lico and me. It felt like I was being guarded by everyone, but I was actually their "axis" for exploring the forest. My plan was to look for this birdbold, Kuula, and if I found some Walpurgis grass along the way, that would be great.

We called out for Kuula, but got no response.

I just hope he didn't get into an accident. Or ran into a monster...

“Kuula!”

“Kuula, can you hear us?!”

“Kuuuulaaa!”

We all called for him as we walked deeper into the dense forest, but I was so distracted by the vines and brush tripping me up, I couldn’t focus on the search all that much.

Grr, these weeds are up to my knees! If only my body was a little bigger, I wouldn’t trip over them!

“Ah... I think I heard something!” Sierro, who was walking to the left of me, said as his drooping ears perked up.

“What, is it Kuula?” Shida asked.

“Wait, quiet!”

The two of them stopped, and I started waving my hands and jumping up and down to signal the knights behind me. Lico gestured for everyone to hold their positions, and everyone else stopped calling out and strained their ears to listen. Ledo and Lys’s groups, which were ahead and to the right of us, approached Sierro.

“...I think I heard a scream,” Sierro eventually said. “And it’s coming closer.”

“A scream?”

“Y-Yeah. A scream...and I think I feel something bad coming this way.”

“Ngh! Get back, Sierro!” Shida called out. “I sense Kathra in the area!”

“What?!”

“Ah...!”

Shida opened his large book while Sierro drew his sword. Ledo nocked an arrow in his bow and took cover within the bushes. Seeing them brace themselves, Lico held up her Air Gun as she and the other knights moved ahead of us. We stood in the middle of the forest, with its poor footing, as the air around us grew heavy.

“E-Erm, this can’t be a...?” I asked nervously.

“It probably is,” Lico said. “Demi-humans are much more sensitive to the monsters’ presence than we are. Don’t move away from me, Tinaris.”

“O-Okay.”

I didn’t know what kind of monster was coming, but I opened my medicine pouch. It had high-grade tonics, antidotes, and medicine for assorted conditions. I couldn’t help on the fighting front, but I could at least support them...

“Ah, no good! It circled around us!” Shida called out. “Commander, it’s behind us!”

“What?!”

Hearing an ominous rustling sound, I turned around, only to catch sight of a black lump being blown away to the right. Shida’s book flashed, creating an explosion before my eyes that blew away the enemy.

Was that magic? No...that’s not important right now!

“Lico?!” I cried.

“I’m fine! Kuh!”

Apparently, she was the black lump I saw get blown away—her armor’s left side was full of cracks.

It’s so powerful...!

That monster was capable of causing this much damage, but I couldn’t even see it. It probably hid in the grass again.

Wh-What do I do? I can’t even keep up with how fast it moves...

“Get back, Captain!” Kunon said, stepping in front of me with her thick armor and shield brandished.

“Dammit, what was that thing?” Michael murmured, holding up his shield behind us.

Lico got to her feet and hurried back to her position beside me, within their protective circle.

I could hear something rustling through the grass. The forest, which was dark even during the daytime, was filled with strained tension.

“Lico, take this tonic...” I said, offering her one of the bottles.

“Not yet,” she curtly shook her head.

“B-but...”

“These injuries aren’t serious. We need to get a handle on where the monster is and beat it right now! That’s our mission here.”

Lico... Aah, why do I always need to have people protect me like this? Wait, the monster...I can help look for it, too!

I strained my ears, cautiously listening to the rustling. It was definitely there, close by. The way it moved wasn’t unlike the way the monster that had attacked me when I first met Lico slithered around.

Based on how it moved through the grass and how hard it was to see it, maybe that serpent monster came back somehow?

No, this one blew Lico away. That serpent monster used its

venomous fangs to attack. Maybe this one was just cautious because there were so many of us...?

"Sierro, can you see Kuula somewhere around here?" Shida asked.

"I think the screaming stopped a few feet away from here. Lemme go and— No good! We're surrounded!"

"Hmph..."

"Surrounded? What do you mean?!" Vector shouted at the two of them.

We were standing fairly close together, but we were still divided into two groups, with the knights standing in formation a short distance away. But even so, Sierro stood with his sword drawn, refusing to move.

I think there's still some distance between us and the monster... Why do they think we're surrounded?

"We're surrounded by a great mass of Kathra right now... This human continent is such a terrifying place. I never knew your land housed so much Kathra..."

"Shida, what kind of monster is it?!" Sierro asked.

"Right! Its category is 'monster,' and its threat level is A! It's a Centipede—a bug monster!"

"Seriously...?!"

"And there's another one underground, too! A threat level B monster, Earthworm...!"

"Two of them?"

"At once...?!"

"Ahahaha!" Shida laughed grandly. "The monsters are fighting over prey, since there's so many of us here!"

"This is no laughing matter!" Sierro snapped at him.

Even from this distance, I saw both Gawain and Vector direct bitter glances toward him. Sierro was right; this wasn't the time to laugh. I had to marvel at his ability to identify monsters like that, though. Was it some kind of magic?

Either way, there were two of them attacking us at once, one of them from underground...

This is really bad!

"Can't we get them to attack each other?!"

"I doubt it! Monsters only show interest in living beings," Shida said. "That said, isn't it a little too big? Are all the monsters on this continent this big...? Mm... No, wait. The way it's

moving...”

I'm surprised you can talk so much in this situation...

It felt like he was using Vector's question as a reason to keep blabbering, and that made us all glare at him for a second. But the monsters' movements really were strange. Shida's cheeky smile turned to a nervous scowl.

“...Hey, knights... Is there something off to the east? Some kind of place where people gather, like a city or a town?” he asked.

“Huh? There's an inn to the east at the foot of Mount Rofola where travelers rest—”

“An inn?! Oh, no... They were trying to lure us away from the inn! Commander, quick! Lead us back to the inn! We can leave Kuula for later! Monsters have a tendency to seek out places full of people!”

“What?!” Lico's eyes widened in surprise. “Everyone, head back to the inn, now! Vector, Gawain, Lys, you run ahead! Tell the people at the inn that danger is coming!”

“Ah!”

“Roger that!”

By the time I realized what was going on, the three knights had already left. I felt my body shaking despite myself.

Wait. Wait. Wait a second... What did they just say? They have a tendency to seek out places full of people...?

“L-Lico...” I turned to look at her.

“We have to hurry back.”

“Yes!”

“Roger!”

“Shida, Ledo, Sierro, my apologies, but take care of her, will you?” Lico told the demi-human party.

“Mm,” Shida said.

“Lico, wait! I'll come—” I started.

“No! Wait here with them!”

Lico and the rest were checking their equipment as they prepared to follow the other three. I wanted to go back to the Rofola Lodge with them!

The monsters are heading for the inn. They want to attack the people there! I can't let them do that!

“Ah...”

...But, but...what can I even do?! I'm just a ten-year-old girl; I can't fight! No...even if I was an adult, I don't know how to fight. I'd

just get in the way if I went there. But, but...!

“Wh-What are we gonna do?” Ledo asked anxiously as he hurried over to Sierrro and Shida.

He was talking about the monsters heading for the inn, of course. This wasn’t their problem. I was left in their care, but they could just leave me here and go off to do their own thing. After all, none of them said they’d look after me.

That’s right. They didn’t agree to babysit me...

“Wait, where are you going?!” Shida shouted as I ran off.

“Back to the inn! I’ll help evacuate the guests!”

“What are you saying?! There’s a massive monster headed there! You going isn’t going to—”

“I know! I’ll probably just get in the way, but my medicine might help!”

“Come to think of it, the old man did say you were an alchemical apothecary when he was praising you. Hm...” Shida hummed thoughtfully.

Ledo had grabbed my arm, and I couldn’t shake him off.

N-Nnng! Let go, I have to get going!

“Y-You guuuuuuuuuys!” a shout suddenly reached my ears.

“Mm?” Shida looked in the voice’s direction.

“Ah! Kuula!” Ledo called out.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

What?!

A blue mass flew in our direction from the woods with the sound of fluttering wings.

What’s that? The bluebird of happiness? But it talks, and it has a ring over its head...

It matched the description perfectly. The three demi-humans chided the creature, asking it where it had been.

Wait, no... It can’t be...

“A-An angel?” I said aloud.

“Mm? Angel? What’s that?” The creature regarded me curiously, his wings flapping.

“Huh?”

It floated in the air, wearing a cloth outfit that reminded me of Greek mythology...and it had wings on its back, and a ring of light over its head.

H-Huh? That’s...an angel. That’s totally an angel!

“Anyway, good timing, Kuula! Fly us east!”

"Huh? Huh? Why, all of a sudden? I'm tired after those scary things chased me around..." Kuula whined.

"Well, those scary things went east to attack a bunch of humans. They're our allies, and as royalty, I must go and offer my aid as reinforcements. Ah, what a drag... But still, we've bothered those knights a great deal. Mostly because of you!"

"Uu..." Kuula hung their head.

"Y-Yes, you're right. Okay!" Ledo said cheerfully. "Imma go there, too! Sierro, what are you gonna do?"

"I'll, uh... Ugh..." Sierro seemed hesitant.

"Well, if you wanna come, you're welcome to join," Shida said. "If you're gonna stay, babysit the girl."

"I-I'll come with you!"

H-Huuuh?! You don't have to act this creeped out by the idea of keeping an eye on me! N-Not that I care! Hmph!

"Anyway, let's go, Kuula."

"Er, uh, understood! Everyone, hold hands!"

"Come on!" Ledo said cheerfully, extending a hand to me.

"Erm, uh..." I stammered.

"You're coming with us, right?"

"Ah, yes!"

I took Ledo's hand. Sierro held onto Shida's, who held onto Kuula's.

I couldn't really tell if Kuula was a boy or a girl... They just looked like an angel...

"Here we gooooo!"

Ledo held onto Kuula's other hand, and we started levitating, freed from gravity's grip.

"Huh? W-We're flying...?!" I gasped in surprise.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" Shida grinned at me.

We soared over the forest, up into the sky overhead.

Ah, wait, wait, wait up...!

"Whoosh!" Kuula exclaimed, flapping their wings.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I screeched as we started diving down quickly like a bicycle rolling down a hill.

Waitasecondwhattheheckisgoingonhere?!

The forest was zooming past us at dizzying speed!

"I can see it!" Ledo called out.

"Good. Put us down here!" Shida instructed Kuula.

“All right!” the winged creature said.

“We’re touching down. Hold on tight!” Ledo told me.

“Huh? Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Just as I grabbed onto Ledo’s waist, we went into a freefall!

Nooo! Have mercy on me, gravity!

Gravity, which had let go of me for a short time, yanked me back into its all-encompassing embrace.

Why can’t these people land normally?!

I gasped as my feet touched the ground again.

“Wait here!” Ledo said as he and Sierrro ran toward the inn.

Shida and Kuula were still in the air, though. We were halfway down the road connecting the inn to the highway. I tried to get up, but my legs buckled. I was shivering. My entire body was shaking!

Wh-Who can blame me? I’ve always hated roller coasters!

I didn’t think that would’ve somehow come into effect in this life, though.

B-But forget that, I need to get to the inn! Dad, Nakona, Lico, Lys, Gawain, Vector, Michael, Kunon...all the guests... They’re in trouble!

“I...I’ve got to get up...and get to everyone! I don’t have time to sit here like a coward! Get up! You can do it; you gotta do it! Go, me!”

I used the words I’d always tell myself when I’d get depressed and lethargic. It felt like it’d been a while since I’d used those words, but now was the time...

Now’s the time to do it! I have to do it! I have to get up! If I won’t do it, who will?! It’s gotta be me!

“Nng...!”

My knees still felt a bit weak and wobbly, but I somehow managed to get to my feet.

Now, run!

I couldn’t do anything to help, but the one thing I didn’t want to do was be a helpless child who sat back while other people got hurt.

I can’t let you die before I thank you for everything, Dad!

“Haa, haa!”

My lack of stamina was a problem that was hard to ignore now.

I can’t...breathe...! I knew I was out of shape, but... Haa, haa... Maybe I should... haa, haa...consider jogging a bit...!

“Nakona! Aim to the right and down!” Dad was shouting

orders. “Lysteinn, once she crushes its right side, shoot its tail! Gawain and Vector, once it stops twisting, attack its left flank and get behind it! Lico! Once you’re done reloading, shoot it the moment it turns its back on you!”

“Roger that!”

“Okay, Daddy!”

“Let’s go! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

H-Huuuuuh?

“What are you doing here? We told you to wait back there,” Shida said upon seeing me.

“E-Erm, what are they doing?”

He was watching Dad and Nakona help the knights fight the monsters. I approached him, still catching my breath.

Things had turned out differently from what I was expecting...

“Apparently, they have a really skilled commander. It’s quite impressive; he’s leading them all so well, the monsters don’t stand a chance.”

“Th-They don’t?”

They’re putting up a good fight...? Wait... They’re fighting the earthworm monster!

It was jet-black and long, like a thread...though I couldn’t gauge its full length from this distance. Some of its body was still underground.

“I didn’t know some monsters live underground...”

“They do. And it’s gotten quite large, too...” Shida said.

“Monsters can grow bigger?”

“Certainly. The more Kathra they hold within their bodies, the bigger they become... Simply eating living things doesn’t make them grow this much.”

“Huh? Then why do the monsters on this continent get so big?” Ledo asked.

Shida opened the book floating next to him. The letters within it shined. I couldn’t read what it said, but the mystical sight was obviously out of the ordinary. Shida reacted to Ledo’s question with a serious expression, and I could certainly see some semblance of Sirius in his young countenance.

“That’s obvious. It’s because this continent continually scatters Camilla into the Air. And once Camilla ripens, it can turn into Kathra. My old man seems to think the way humans worship their gods is the problem, but...hmph! That old softie. He should just

come out and tell them the truth. But I doubt they'd believe him even if he did. Human pride overshadows even that of the elves!"

I didn't believe in any gods, though. And Dad may have believed in the Gods of De Marl, but he didn't worship them that religiously.

"S-Stop it, Shida. You shouldn't say things like that... You're making it sound like the gods humans worship are the Camilla itself."

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"What?!"

"The Camilla is what's polluting and degrading this continent's Air. The gods the people in this continent worship and believe in are nothing more than meaningless illusions fabricated by those in power to manipulate the masses! And this is the result of these vile acts! Look at it!"

I looked at Shida in stunned silence. It couldn't be... This giant earthworm monster was influenced by nonexistent gods humans made up?

I glanced around and found to my relief that the guests were safe. They were watching Dad and the knights fight from the campsite. *Thank goodness...*

"That's enough talking, though. Hey, commander man!"

"Huh?" Dad seemed to have heard Shida. "You guys, take care of Tina and the guests!"

"That's not what I called out to you for, fool! There's a centipede coming! It's coming through the forest. The earthworm got here faster because it went directly underground! And the centipede's probably faster! It has no intelligence, but it moves on instinct!"

"What...?"

"Looking at the way you fight, I think you'll be fine. We'll keep that one in check, so beat it back quickly and come help us! Let's go, Ledo, Sierro! It's coming from the direction of the lake! We have to stall it!"

"G-Got it!"

"Tch; I hate humans, though!" Sierro growled.

Shida levitated a few inches off the ground. His large book opened again, its text lighting up as the roof of one of the four-room cottages was blown off.

"Aaaaah! Cottage number two's roof!" I let out a scream, but

the next moment, the centipede burst through another cottage's wall.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaah, stop it! Not cottage number one, too?! S-Stop it; why are you breaking our cottages?!"

"Taaaaaaah!"

"Fire Arrow!"

Sierro and Ledo attacked the centipede as it landed on the ground, but the monster approached the lake and began scurrying in the campsite's direction.

It's headed to where the guests are...!

A monster's instincts were to attack as many living beings as it could.

We've finally been getting more guests, but it only led to this! It's not faiiir!

"Photon Bomb!"

As Ledo's burning arrow sank into the centipede, it started slowing down—though it didn't completely stop. Shida's spells then created an explosion that blasted its head and sent it scurrying away from the inn. Sierro charged at it with his sword, forcing the centipede to change its target to the nuisances in its way.

"Ugh, it's hard!" Sierro huffed as his sword clanged against the centipede's exoskeleton.

"Of course it is, you stupid mutt!" Shida shouted at him. "Don't let down your guard; centipedes have a very tough hide compared to other monsters! And when it's this large, your sword can't even scratch it!"

"Then what am I supposed to do?!"

"Just keep it occupied until the knights beat back the earthworm! Their alchemical weapons should be able to tear off a layer of its exoskeleton!"

"That so?!" Dad responded to their conversation. "Then Lico, Michael, go and help them! Nakona, pull that earthworm out of the ground!"

"A-All right!" Nakona nodded.

"Don't order me around," Lico growled at Dad.

"Listen, Lico, we should listen to the former Vice-Captain for now!" Lys warned her.

Whoa, this is chaotic... Lico's still mad at Dad...

Still, she seemed to heed his instructions and moved with Michael over to Shida's position. This left Nakona, Kunon, Vector,

Gawain, and Lysteinn to handle the earthworm, while Shida, Sierro, Ledo, Lico, and Michael concentrated on the centipede, with Dad commanding the scene.

“You there, elf boy! What’s your name?” Dad asked.

“It’s Shida, and don’t treat me like a child! I’m older than you are!”

“Fine, Shida! Tell me everything you know about these monsters! Keep it brief!”

“Don’t be absurd...but fine! Centipede monsters have thick armor, so swords and arrows can’t damage them! Watch out for the pincers on their mouth. The venom on them can paralyze and cause convulsions. Though if it does bite you, it’ll probably just cut you in half anyway!”

“Gawain, Vector, cover the worm from both sides! Kunon, you face it head-on and deflect its attacks! While she does that, Nakona, Gawain, Vector, you three draw its attention. Lysteinn, you see if you can widen the hole around it!”

“Roger that! Beginning to load my weapon!”

Wh-Whoa...Dad’s so cool!

He gave the knights proper instructions and kept coming up with ways to resolve the situation.

Was he always this cool...?

Everyone moved according to Dad’s orders, so no one was hurt by the earthworm’s attacks. No one was visibly injured.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much the right way to handle the earthworm,” Shida said, observing their battle when he could. “But it tends to attack with two-thirds of its body underground. Watch out for its dissolving juices! It’ll narrow its mouth to spew it out over a large area. You’ll probably be helpless against it without magic, so you, black alchemy youngster, change places with me. I’ll use wind magic to block it off.”

“All right! Lysteinn, change places with him! Go help Lico blow through the centipede’s armor!” Dad ordered.

“Roger!”

“The centipede is weak to heat and the earthworm is sensitive to bright lights!” Shida continued. “If you can direct a bright light right above it, it should make the earthworm flee! I’ll give you one of my photons to create a light source, so Commander, I’m counting on your people to distract it!”

“All righty, drag its head down! Nakona, come back here!

Kunon, put your shield on your back!"

"Huh?"

Kunon turned around questioningly, but Dad simply urged her on with a "Hurry!"

Th-They're really coordinated... Dad and Shida are really amazing. Did they really just meet?

Dad stood in front of Nakona, and Gawain and Vector were standing diagonally behind the earthworm. What were they trying to do?

"Kunon! Get down! Nakona!"

"Roger, Daddy! Kunon, excuse me for a second!"

"Ah, y-yes, young miss!"

Did someone train all the knights to call Nakona that?

Either way, Nakona sprinted toward Kunon's back, who was carrying her shield behind her, and then jumped.

Huh? Wait, that's dangerous...!

"Shida!"

"I hear you!"

Huh?! Wait, what?!

It looked like the two of them somehow understood each other's plan.

The moment Nakona reached the zenith of her jump...!

"Concentrated 10-Hit Combo!"

"...!"

Nakona showered a series of shining blows into the earthworm's face!

Wh-Wha... Nakona had this kind of technique up her sleeve...?!

The earthworm toppled backward with a thud, but Vector and Gawain were waiting for it, their swords swinging down at once.

"Heavy Glow Slash!"

Ah, Gawain is left-handed...

That out-of-place thought crossed my mind as they executed two perfect, exact slashes at once. Nakona's attack sent the monster falling backward, and the knights' attacks bounced it into the air, making it crash into the ground below.

Wh-What a beatdown...

"I'll finish it off!" Shida shouted. "Everyone, close your eyes! Photon flash!"

Gyah?! It's so bright! Couldn't you warn me a second sooner...?!

A flash of dazzling light hit the earthworm's head, forcing me to cover my face with my hands. Even with that, the light was blinding. It was like the sun had appeared right in front of me.

"All right, everyone; we're fighting the centipede next!" Dad said, continuing to control the situation. "Nakona, can you still fight?!"

"I can use a technique one...maybe two more times!"

"All right! Shida, can you use any heat magic?!"

"You underestimate me, human! I'm the 37th Prince of Forestria and the Elf of the Sun, chosen by the olden king's grimoire! I may be of mixed blood, but those who wield grimoires are not confined to any one field of magic!"

"Good! Then Lico, Lysteinn! Once you're done reloading your weapons, chase that thing off!"

"Stop ordering me around!" Lico snarled at Dad again.

"L-Licooo..." Lys chided her.

By the time my eyes recovered from the flash, the earthworm was gone, leaving only a hole in the ground in its wake. Dad and the others moved to help push back the centipede.

Lico's still being huffy. Is this gonna be all right? I mean, I think it will... They beat the earthworm without getting hurt at all! And now they're facing the centipede with more people!

"Keep your wits about you! It's more dangerous than the earthworm!" Shida warned everyone.

"You heard him, people! Michael, Kunon, move ahead and attack it!"

"Roger!" The two of them moved per Dad's orders.

"Watch out for its mandibles and tail while it attacks! Vector, Gawain, and the kobold warrior, go around its right flank while keeping your head down and attack it! Dwarf warrior, go to Lico and Lysteinn's side! Nakona, keep an eye on how it moves, get behind it, and draw its attention!"

W-Woow...this is cool. Everything's going the way Daddy says.

Michael and Kunon approached the centipede, their heads ducked as the centipede thrust its fangs into their shields. It pushed them back, their legs dragging against the ground as it did...but the mandibles never penetrated their shields.

While the monster was occupied, Sierro, Vector, and Gawain ran to its right side, thrusting their swords into its flank. As it turned its underbelly in my direction, the centipede seemed to have

noticed Nakona. It twisted its body, going after Nakona with its mandibles bared!

“Lico, now!”

“Everyone, open fire!”

As it went after Nakona, Lico, Lysteinn, and Ledo all mercilessly fired their weapons at the centipede’s exposed underbelly! Had it been the serpent monster I’d seen before, it probably would’ve been completely blown away.

“Hissssssssssss!”

“Huh?!”

“Are you serious...?!”

My hands clasped over my mouth in terror.

How is it unharmed?!

Even after taking all those attacks, the centipede’s shell hadn’t lost its luster. It was frustrating, to be honest. Lys clicked his tongue.

“Maybe I should have used my full firepower on it.” Lico shook her head.

“What? Lico, you were holding back on it?!” Lys stared at her, frustrated.

“It’s not like we can risk accidentally killing it,” she said.

L-Lico was holding back? Then maybe we have hope after all...?

“You’re joking. I just fired at maximum firepower!”

“I-I shot my strongest arrows, too...” Ledo stammered.

“Hm, how high can your firepower go, skulled alchemist?” Shida asked Lico.

“I’ve been firing at half power. Next time, I’ll hit it at full force.”

“All right, let’s try it,” Dad said. “Everyone else, give it one more push!”

“Yes!”

“Of course we will!” Nakona chimed in. “If I could, I’d have this thing compensate us for those cottages!”

Me too, Nakona! How dare that stupid centipede wreck two of our cottages!

“Go, go, Nakona!” I cheered for her.

“You know it! Daddy, I’ll knock this thing into the ground!”

“I’m counting on it, Nakona! Gawain, Vector, and the kobold warrior, hold your positions and keep your distance from its tail! Dwarf warrior, shoot a flaming arrow at its tail! Once it starts

panicking, all of you, hit it as hard as you can! Once it topples over and shows its stomach, shoot it, Lico!”

“Fine. But don’t order me around,” she huffed.

“...Could you drop the grudge already...?”

Wow, Dad’s starting to give up. Lico’s grudges sure are something...

“Whoaaa, everyone’s so cool,” I heard a voice say behind me.

“Ah!” I wheeled around in surprise.

That angel from earlier was hiding behind a tree. I did notice they’d disappeared at some point!

“It’s dangerous, so you should stay there,” I said.

“Then shouldn’t you hide, too?” the angel asked me.

“P-Probably...”

They weren’t wrong. Where would I hide, though?

The people hiding near the campsite were looking over here anxiously. If I wanted to go there, I’d have to run behind everyone as they were fighting. And that would only distract them...

“Ah, the way it’s moving...?! This is bad!” Shida shouted.

“Tinaris!”

“Huh?” I uttered, dumbfounded.

The fighters turned to look at me. A cobalt sheen filled my eyes as an armored figure rushed toward me, grabbed me by the arm, and threw me away to the left.

“Ah...!”

As I flew in midair, I saw a thick, yellow liquid splash over Lico. I landed hard on the ground, rolling a few feet away. It hurt, but I got the feeling what I’d just seen was far scarier than this pain...!

I couldn’t stop my teeth from clattering in terror as I fearfully looked up.

“Don’t lose your composure! Everyone, look ahead! The enemy’s still at large!”

The knights turned to face the centipede at Dad’s rebuking. But a large body lay on the ground, with steam-like smoke rising from it. Nakona was the only one to hurry over to it. Sierro, Ledo, and Shida remained focused on fighting the centipede, but everyone was definitely shaken by this. My arms and legs ached, but more importantly than that...!

“L-Lico!”

“Tina!” Dad barked at me.

“Ah...!”

My hair was unkempt, and I was dirty with mud and brush bristles, but all of that could wait! I made to hurry over to Lico, but Dad’s shout jolted me.

His angry voice reminded me of my past life...of the times when my “father” from back then beat my mother and me.

“She can still make it! If you give her the Supreme tonic now, she’ll make it!”

“Ah...!”

Those were words that that man—who would always shout, wave his fists, and throw beer cans at me—would never say. Something warm filled my heart, and I clenched my fists before my chest.

I...

“Can you do that for me?!”

“Yes!”

My body, which had frozen up with the fear of those memories, turned hot. I broke into a desperate sprint and slid down next to Lico on my knees. I said nothing as Nakona looked on anxiously. I simply opened my pouch and scattered the bottles full of faint-pink fluid to the ground. I then opened one of them, one that had what looked like faint gold powder floating in the liquid.

“Tina...” Nakona muttered.

“Lico, drink this! Nakona, watch our backs, please!”

“A-All right!”

I lifted Lico’s head. Her injuries were...horrible. Her breastplate was crushed, the metal digging into her flesh. There was steam rising from a few spots on her body.

Was it because of that yellow liquid?

“If you have medicine for assorted conditions, have her drink that, too!” Shida called out to me.

“Why?!”

“That’s probably the centipede’s specialty, the paralyzing venom! I’ve never heard of one spitting it out in a glob like this, but...”

“Understood!”

I took out a bottle filled with a green fluid too.

“Lico, please! Please!” I called out to her.

Nakona and Lys also joined in, calling her name. Nakona was shivering as she spoke. I then brought the Supreme tonic to Lico’s

lips.



Drink it... Come on... Swallow! Please, please! Don't die...!

I could make out the faint sound of her gulping it down. I've never been so happy to hear any sound in my life... Tears spilled from my eyes. I poured the green liquid into her mouth with shaking fingers, and Lico proceeded to swallow that, too.

At this point, I was crying so hard, I couldn't even see in front of me. The tears spilled freely, obscuring my field of vision.

"Sh-She drank it, Tina..." Nakona said, her voice choked with tears.

"Y-Yeah!" I nodded.

"Lico, thank goodness..." Lys said.

"Lysteinn! I told you to keep your eyes on the enemy!" Dad chided him.

"Y-Yes! My apologies, Vice-Captain!"

"Former Vice-Captain!"

Lys was being chewed out by Dad. It was kind of funny to listen to.

Were Lico's wounds healing properly, though?

Based on both Dad and Lico's Appraisal magic, the Supreme tonic's quality was average, so maybe it wasn't strong enough to heal wounds this severe...

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, still sobbing. But then, what looked like golden scales began closing her wounds, and the bits of the armor that stabbed into her flesh were pushed out of her body.

Lico was healing... Everything, from her bloody wounds to her scarred face, was recovering. She opened her eyes slowly, coughed a couple of times to resume breathing, and sat up.

My vision once again clouded over with tears.

I mean, it's just...!

"Licoooooooooooooooooo!"

"Whoa!"

I was just a mess. I could tell Nakona plunged into Lico's arms, but I couldn't even tell if her body felt warm or not. I couldn't stop sobbing and shaking...

Ugh, I'm getting snot all over her... I can't let anyone see me like this...

"I have a suggestion, bearded commander!" Shida told Dad.

"What is it?!"

"The situation's only going to get worse at this rate. With the

skull alchemist's weapon ruined, we don't have a way of dealing a decisive blow. So, I'll have to use something a bit stronger, but it's hard to gather the Air for the spell with all the Camilla around here. I'll need you to buy me five minutes."

"Five minutes..."

"Wait! I still have one arm I can use."

"Huh? Lico!"

While I was busy sobbing, Lico put a hand on my head...and then got to her feet, still wobbling a bit. She pushed me away and then jammed something into the Air Gun in her left hand.

Was she reloading?

"Tinaris, thank you. You saved me again. I'll finish this off."

"Lico..."

She turned to look at me over her shoulder and flashed a smile.

You look cool. You're so cool, Lico!

"As Captain of the Ebony Knights and a member of House Avide, I guarantee I'll produce the same firepower of both hands with just my left."

"Hm... Three minutes, then!" Shida amended.

"Right! Well, you all heard them!" Dad called out. "That big boy over there is starting to get bored with us, so let's take it down this time!"

"Yes, sir!" the knights said in unison.

"I'll give it my best shot too, Daddy!" Nakona said resolutely. "I haven't seen a guest this rude in forever! I'll pick him up by his collar and kick him to the moons! And there'll be no coming back to the Rofola Lodge for him!"

"Ahaha! Ya ain't wrong!"

Yeah...we gotta teach a guest like this that he's not welcome in our business!

I wiped away the tears and got to my feet.

"Good luck, you guys!"

Hearing something, I turned around and saw people—our guests—calling out to us to "Do your best!" and some of the knights gave a resounding "We will!"

Yeah... We're not losing this!

"All right, Tina, take a few steps back and get some low-grade tonics ready!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Dad started giving me instructions too. It filled me with excitement because this meant I was as much a part of this battle as everyone else. Something welled up within me, a sort of...

Heat.

“Let’s go! Michael, Kunon, get to its flank with the shields on your back! Gawain, Vector, you get behind it and step away until I give the signal! Ledo, prepare the strongest arrow your magic can shoot and fire at will!”

“You got it!”

“Lysteinn, keep it pinned down with a volley!”

“Roger that, sir! Firing a light volley!”

“Sierro, fight with Nakona and use all your mana! Just hit it as hard as you can!”

“D-Don’t boss me around, human!” Sierro imitated Lico, but did as he was told.

“You got it, Daddy!”

Lysteinn fired volleys of bullets with Air Guns in both hands, forcing the centipede to stand up and start curling around. We needed to buy three minutes of time. It was like we were drawing this out as long as we could.

W-Wow... Lys could do something like that?

“Hey, miss, miss!” someone called out next to me,

“Whoa!” I jolted. “Oh, it’s just you, Kuula... I think you should still be hiding.”

“Yes, but, er, is the person in the skull armor all right now?”

“Yes, one way or another... We’re giving it one more push to finish this! Keep yourself hidden and cheer everyone on!”

“Ah, yes! Understood! I’ll help cheer for everyone!”

...Such a c-cute angel... Aaah...

Looking at Kuula up close, I noticed they were floating despite their wings not really moving. Plus, they had a ring of light over their head like a halo.

A-Amazing. Is this really an angel? It is, right?

Either way, right now, I needed to cheer Michael and Kunon on!

“Fight on! Good luck!” I called out to them.

“Good luck!” Kuula parroted me.

“Mm? What is this feeling?” Michael asked right after we cheered them on.

“Something feels different...” Kunon said.

Kuula got down from the tree and started cheering alongside me. That’s all we could really do, after all, and we were far enough from the action that, even if the centipede shot another glob of venom, we wouldn’t get hit!

Next, we cheered on Gawain and Vector.

“Go, go, you two!”

“Good luck!”

“I feel good...” Gawain muttered.

“What is this? I was exhausted and out of mana, but now it’s all coming back...” Vector said.

“Nakona, Sierro, you two keep going, too!”

“Huh?” Nakona gazed at her hands. “My mana...”

“Mm? My body feels light!” Sierro growled.

“Lys, Lico, Shida, Ledo!” I called. “Keep fighting, win! Kick him away! Just don’t get hurt!”

“Mm? My mana’s recovering?”

“What is this? My body feels warm...”

“Oooh! I feel motivated all of a sudden!”

“...Is this Kuula’s ability?” Shida asked. “I didn’t know they had that kind of power... I’ll demand an explanation later. Not that I expect any good answers out of them. All right, time to do this...”

“Vice-Captain Marcus, I’m gonna run out of bullets soon!” Lys groaned.

“It’s former Vice-Captain! Ledo!”

“All righty! Leave it to me!”

The centipede frolicked about, evading Lys’s shots. But just as the barrage died down, Ledo unleashed an arrow into the sky above them.

“Eternal Arrows!”

The single arrow he shot suddenly split, turning into a shower of arrows that blotted the monster out.

Huuuuuuuh?! How did he do that?! How does that work?! This looks more like magic than a technique!

“Kuh... Twenty...more...seconds!” Shida said, his face contorted with effort. “Let’s go... Sea of Stars, Song of the Wind, Mark of the Earth, and Song of Flames. I hereby transcribe one decree of the monolith at the furthest end of the world and borrow its power. I weave a new prayer so that the accumulated sins of our life may be forgiven! By my name, Shida Forestria, I ask the King,

the Holy Woman, and the God for forgiveness! May thy forgiveness of that God shine down on us. I invoke a fraction of that power onto this world!”

With his spell finished, he shouted, “Bearded commander!”

“All right! Gawain, Vector!” Dad bellowed.

Ledo’s shower of arrows died down, and at that exact moment, Gawain and Vector broke into a sprint. Just like Nakona did earlier, they used Kunon and Michael, who were crouching, as springboards to leap up!

Whoa, they’re so high up! They’re way over the centipede’s head!

“This is our secret technique!” Vector called out.

“No holding back! This will finish it! Let’s go, Vector!” Gawain raised his voice.

“Overcross Light!”

As the centipede snarled, it seemed to know it couldn’t avoid this pincer attack. Their attack drew a cross of light that bore down on the monster. Its head went plummeting toward the ground, but that’s when Nakona and Sierro pounced on it!

“And stay away from our inn! Three-Pointed Concentrated Thirty-Blow Flurry!”

“This is my only technique! Haaaaaa... Justice Sword!”

Whoa, this is dazzling!

Both their attacks shined like some kind of rainbow!

I didn’t know you could do something like that, Nakona! You really are a genius!

“Its stomach is exposed! Now!” Dad called out.

“Feel the full extent of this power!”

“Let’s go, Lysteinn!”

“You got it, Lico!”

“Photon Flame Room!” Shida swung his hand as his book lit up.

A blast hit the centipede monster’s tail, knocking its massive body into the air. And at that moment, Lico and Lys’s alchemical weapons fired.

“Grenade Launcher!” Lico and Lys cried together.

The centipede let out an odd screech as their gunfire hit it. It crashed on the ground, thrashing and letting out panicked chirps before scrambling to its feet and scurrying into the forest toward the mountain.

“Yaaaaa—”

But just as I was about to let out a relieved “Yaaaaay...”

Bang! Brrrrrrrrrr....!

“Ah...”

“Uh...”

“C-Cottage number three and number six!”

That stupid monster left us with a pretty big parting present, in the form of two more cottages reduced to rubble.

Heyyyyy! What did you do that for?! Why did you have to go through there of all places?! Stupid centipede! Never come anywhere near this place again! Seriously!!!



THE morning after the attack, the knights’ six-room cottage and the five-room cottage Shida’s party used were thankfully still intact, but...

“How much do you think it’ll cost to fix them...?” Nakona asked with distant eyes.

“I don’t know... Heh, but look on the bright side, we’ll have plenty of firewood to sell the campers,” Dad replied dryly.

“But now, all people will talk about is how monsters attacked our inn,” I said, slumped over one of the coffee corner’s tables. “We were finally getting guests, and now people are gonna stay away from us again...”

After the monster attack, the guests who’d celebrated our grand victory hurriedly checked out and left. Which was understandable... Most adventurers would never pick a fight with a monster. Especially not big ones. An inn that got attacked by two monsters couldn’t be seen as safe.

It’s strange. An inn should be a place where people can relax in safety and enjoy good cooking and a nice view. Some inns have made being haunted a selling point, but a monster-infested inn? That wouldn’t sell.

What are we supposed to do?! And now, all our four-room cottages are ruined... Damn that stupid centipede!

“Why don’t you set up a monster-repelling barrier?” Shida proposed as he entered the main building with his group. “With this land’s leylines, once you set up a barrier, it should last for a thousand years.”

“Huh?”

“A monster repelling...what?”

“A barrier. It takes quite a bit of preparation, so it’d be too taxing on me alone. I could use someone to help me... Right, how about you, girl?” Shida said to me. “I could manage it within a month if you help me. What say you? Naturally, this means I’d be exempt from lodging and meal fees. Oh, and of course, this would also serve as an introductory course to magic for you. Free of charge.”

“I’d love to!” I said immediately.

“Hey, Tina?!” Dad looked at me, surprised.

I didn’t know anything about magic or barriers, but if that would keep the monsters away, I figured it’d be for the best to understand how to do it.

Plus, a magic course?! How cool was that?

“Listen, Dad, we’ll actually be profiting off of this!”

“B-But Tina, magic is dangerous business...”

“But she’s good at alchemy, isn’t she?” Shida asked. “The old man kept blabbering on about how talented she is. Even said he wants me to marry her...”

“Huh?” Dad let out a shocked grunt.

“Oh, about that! I have to politely refuse,” I told Shida off-handedly.

“Ahaha! That’s what I thought!”

I-It is?

“We’ll help you with fixing the cottages!” Ledo said.

“Really?!” I asked.

“We’ve got a month, right? That’s plenty of time! I’m a dwarf, after all. Building and fixing things is my specialty!”

“O-Oh...” Dad said pensively. “But the materials are gonna be expensive...”

“If we’re missing anything, we can just make more! We’ll manage,” Ledo said.

“In exchange for a free dessert every meal,” Shida appended.

He really knows how to use the situation to his advantage.

Dad sighed in resignation. Still, they’d be helping fix the cottages, so we had to treat them to something. And since Shida was making a barrier to keep monsters away from the inn, we really should give them all the little discounts we could!

“All that in exchange for setting up a monster-repelling barrier

and fixing your cottages. I think it's quite the reasonable trade."

"H-Hm," Dad crossed his arms.

I could see he was bothered by the fact that we were getting more out of this deal than they were. I had to admit that weighed on my mind, too. Dad then started negotiating with them, asking about the costs and effort needed to set up the barrier.

It was a legitimate question. Shida and his group didn't really know the market price here. They needed to be introduced to how the economics of this continent worked.

"So you see, just one month's lodging and meal fees aren't enough to cover for this..." Dad said.

"It's fine," Shida replied, dismissing his concerns.

"Huh...? B-But, listen to me..."

"No, you listen to me. If you're the Azure Demon Wolf of De Marl, then we owe you this much. You came to our lands and helped fight off that band of fools. I'll have you know, you're quite famous in Forestria. It's said you lost your arm during the Jiera Defensive Campaign..."

Dad gasped at the mention of that name.

"The people of Jiera went extinct... It was quite a regrettable loss. Forestria sent troops to help, but they failed to arrive in time, so we cannot fault De Marl's knights for this. In fact, you arrived there before we did... How pathetic of us."

"No..."

Jiera? I think I've heard that name somewhere... But Dad really is amazing. He's even famous among the demi-humans.

Still, something was bothering me about that name. *Jiera...*

"Erm, Dad, Shida. What's Jiera...?" I asked.

"Mm? O-Oh. It used to be the only demi-human country on the human continent. It was to the west of Fei Lu, hidden in the westernmost forest. A species of demi-humans called the Spherit Folk lived there. They had Spherit Stones embedded in their foreheads..."

"...Huh, er...? Spherit Stones?"

"Yes, you know about Spherit Stones, don't you?" Shida asked.

"Humans require the aid of Spherit Stones to use magic, I believe. Spherit Stones were typically created when the Spherit Folk concentrated mana into ordinary stones. That said, there was a simpler way of getting Spherit Stones...killing the Spherit Folk and extracting the stones from their foreheads. Ten years ago, the

people of that country, Edesa Kura, went about doing this quite ruthlessly.”

That’s...

“That’s awful...” Nakona said, visibly appalled. “So, Uncle Romulus died because he was trying to stop Edesa Kura from taking away the Spherit Folk’s stones?”

“That’s right,” Dad answered her. “Romulus had a partner, an adventurer called Jinray, and he was married to Jiera’s princess... That connection was probably what made him do it. Imagine throwing your life away to help a friend like that. He was...one impressive man, Romulus.”

“...Yeah,” Nakona nodded sadly. “Uncle Romulus was one awesome man.”

The country of Jiera.

Spherit Folk.

Edesa Kura.

Stones embedded in their foreheads...

“Rubia...my precious daughter... Our country of Jiera is at its end. But you will survive...”

“May the blood of the Stone of Daybreak...never come to awaken. And may she always be safe...”

“Aah... Aaah...”

“You must live on.”

Thump. Thump.

The loud sound of something beating thundered in my ears. My chest tightened up and I became dizzy.

Memories of ten years ago.

But I remember.

I...I remember!

It was just after I recalled my past life!

“Huh?” Nakona exclaimed, looking at me. “T-Tina, what’s wrong?!”

“What?”

Maybe all the flashes yesterday did something to my tear ducts.

“That’s weird...”

Nakona’s concerned gaze made me realize I was crying. I remembered—those people were my mother and father. I’d always had that feeling. But...

“...I don’t really understand, but...”

That was why? That was why they sent me away?

That’s horrible. It’s...too horrible...!

That was why my mother and father “abandoned” me. It was then. It must have been that day! They washed me down the river because... I...

“...Thinking about that must have really shaken you up,” Dad said. “You were always a sensitive girl.”

“Right,” Nakona nodded. “Don’t worry, Tina, I’ll handle dinner today.”

“Y-Yeah...” I murmured, tears still streaming down my cheeks.

Nakona sat me down at the edge of the coffee corner and wiped my tears away with a handkerchief, but nothing helped.

The people of Jiera were wiped out. Massacred. The people of my own race, whom I’d never met before, were all killed so horrible people could gouge the stones out of their foreheads. Just imagining it made me shake nonstop.

A massacre meant even the women, elderly, and children were slaughtered. Everyone died. Our kind went extinct.

Was the stone in my mother’s forehead torn off, too...? No... That’s...that’s horrible! So the Stone of Daybreak means the stone in their foreheads? I don’t want that, then!

“Well, either way, us demi-humans owe you a debt of gratitude, Azure Demon Wolf of De Marl,” Shida said. “Several of my brothers have decided to trade with the human continent solely out of respect for you. If you are in need of help, I will offer you my aid.”

“Yep, yep! Imma offer my help, too!” Ledo nodded with a grin.

“What about you, Sierro? We’ll be staying here for a month, but what are you gonna do?”

“Uh,” Sierro growled, visibly torn. “F-Fine, I’ll help you. But I don’t get along with humans!”

“Yayyyy! I’ll help, too!” Kuula piped in.

“That’s discounts for all four of us, then.”

“...Thank you, Prince of Forestria.”

“Don’t be a bloody fool. I’m saying I’ll help you not as a Prince of Forestria, but as a single elf. Don’t push your luck.”

“Ahaha. That was presumptuous of me. All right, I’ll accept your help, then,” Dad said with a smile.

I somehow managed to walk back to the attic, despite insisting I'd help out with dinner. I went out on the balcony and looked up at the sky in silence.

They were all massacred...

Putting my memories and what Shida and Dad said earlier together, it became clear to me that I was one of the Spherit Folk. I recalled my real father didn't have a Spherit Stone in his forehead either, but that didn't matter as much...

What did matter was that Jiera, the country of the Spherit Folk, was destroyed by Edesa Kura ten years ago. All because they wanted the Spherit Stones embedded into the Spherit Folk's foreheads.

Spherit Stones were rare, unique stones that assisted humans in using magic. The Spherit Folk could turn normal stones into Spherit Stones, but Edesa Kura wanted to get a large stash of them at once. So, they attacked Jiera and slaughtered the Spherit Folk to extract the stones in their foreheads...

Aaah, that's horrible... My parents probably realized the country's fate and sent me down the river to save me...

Those that had stones embedded into their forehead were killed, but I didn't have one. But despite that...if the Stone of Daybreak my parents spoke of was actually a Spherit Stone...once the bloodline of the Stone of Daybreak awakens in me, a stone might just appear in my forehead. And if that happens...

Dad, Nakona...everyone will know I'm not human. They'll know I'm one of the Spherit Folk, and the rumors will spread all the way over to Edesa Kura...

No, Edesa Kura isn't the only problem. Bandits or bad people might target me, too. Killing me would get them a precious Spherit Stone for free, after all...

What would I do? I had no kinsmen to help me, since my entire species was eradicated. Was I really the last of the Spherit Folk? I was on the human continent. Even if I crossed over to the demi-human continent, there was no one I could really rely on there. So what do I do...?

"Tinaris?"

"Ah!"

I heard someone call out to me from the hall. I looked into my room through the window and saw someone looking around.

It was Lico...

"Lico! Are you feeling better now?" I asked.

"Tinaris, are you out on the balcony?"

"Yes. Come on over."

My room and the balcony were separated by a glass door. The balcony had a wooden deck floor and offered a clear view of the surrounding area. The clear morning air would gradually rise up, filling the balcony with the refreshing scent of the noon wind.

This spot gave me a good view of everything. I could see the lake, the campsite, the field, and the vegetable garden. The lake's horizon was especially pretty. The colors of the vegetable garden and the verdant shades of the forest all complimented the blue sky.

I would always come out here and take long, deep breaths that made me feel that much lighter. As if I'd breathed out the gloom that built up within me and took in something fresh and pure instead.

Right... Why am I hesitating so much when I grew up in such a pretty place?

I couldn't work up the courage to talk to Dad and Nakona about this yet. The expressions on their faces when they spoke of Dad's brother still weighed on me. *But if the stone does end up surfacing on my forehead, we can find a way to hide it and just keep on living the way we always did!*

"The view here is stunning," Lico said as she stepped out on the deck.

"It is!"

"It feels like my heart is renewed just by looking at it..."

"Yes, it does..."

Lico and I looked out at the scenery, our hands resting on the railing. All my worries felt so small compared to this expanse of nature.

Yeah...everything will turn out just fine! I'm still alive, after all... I have to repay Dad for everything he did for me. And that black beast guy who saved me, too.

...How will I repay him, though? I guess I have to find him first...

Based on what Dad said, he was a Mythical Beast. Was he from the Mythical continent, then?

Wait, but I was saved on this continent, right...?

"Let me thank you again, Tinaris," Lico said, yanking me out of my thoughts.

"For what?"

“Thank you for saving me... You ended up healing my face, too.”

A pleasant wind blew by, playing with Lico’s long bangs. The gouged, red right half of her face was healed, her skin clear and unblemished. My tonic didn’t just heal the injuries from the venom and her armor stabbing into her, it also restored her face...

“So even that injury from when the serpent monster bit you, back when we first met...”

“All better now... I guess they call it a Supreme tonic for a reason...”

“Really?! That’s wonderful.”

There was always something a little scary about her, but now, she looked like such a pretty lady. Seeing this made me smile. Lico taught me so much about alchemy, so I’d been looking for a chance to return the favor!

I should polish up my skills and make an ideal quality Supreme tonic next time!

I decided this would be a fine goal to strive toward. And about my race...I decided I’d look into things a bit more and talk about it when I had a better grasp on the situation.

Maybe I should go to where Jiera used to be. I might find a clue there. And maybe the demi-human continent, too... Why was Jiera, the country of the Spherit Folk, set on the human continent? Maybe Shida knows...

“Tinaris, we need to discuss your future,” Lico said gravely.

“Huh? Wh-What? My future?”

“Yes. When I go back home, De Marl’s higher-ups will ask me how I healed my face. The only thing that could possibly heal those kinds of scars is either a Supreme tonic, high-grade holy magic, or the lost Power of Miracles—the power of the primordial star, Stella.”

“...”

I gulped. Lico and Dad had argued over this to begin with. Healing Lico’s face meant De Marl would discover my existence... and when that happened, word about me being an alchemical apothecary capable of brewing a Supreme tonic would spread throughout the continent.

N-No, I don’t want that!

Even without that rumor, I was possibly the last member of the Spherit Folk. I wouldn’t be able to lead a normal life with that kind

of attention. That was very bad...

"Wh-What should I do?"

"If they find out you made a Supreme tonic, De Marl will invite you in. They'll try to saddle you with the title of a state alchemist, like Elysis, and bind you to them that way. The life they'll offer you will be a convenient one. You won't want for anything, but the one thing you won't have is freedom. They'll make you concoct toxins and explosives, even if you refuse to do so. Given Edesa Kura's movements, they'll definitely see you as a valuable part of their 'war effort.'"

I hung my head.

"But Marcus and I...and honestly, no one wants that to happen to you. So, I asked Prince Shida if I could report that it was him who healed my wounds and scars."

"...What?" I looked up at the mention of Shida's name.

Lico turned to face me and squatted down to my eye level.

"Prince Shida is the Elf of the Sun, chosen by the grimoire wielded by the ancient ruler of the elves, the olden king Leishi. That grimoire is one of the Seven Sacred Treasures of the Elves and allows its wielder to use magic of all elements. In other words, Prince Shida can use holy magic. That said, from what he told me, being able to wield all the elements means he can't use any one of them to its full power. That's why he can't use enough holy magic to regenerate Marcus's arm. Do you understand what that means?"

"Ah...!"

"But, given what happened yesterday, there's a chance the guests at the campsite saw you give me the tonic. I don't...think any of them knew what you gave me was a Supreme tonic. But we can't deny the possibility someone did. Still, I had my helmet on during the fight, and not many know what I look like without it. So I think everything is fine, but there's no guarantee I'm right."

"...Yes, I...I understand."

For a moment, I was relieved, but...she was right. Our field stood between the spot where I was at that time and the campsite, so it was hard to see us, and everyone was focused on the knights fighting the monster. But while the possibility someone noticed what I did was unlikely...it wasn't a sure thing.

"So what I'm trying to say is...I know it'll be hard, but I need you to help me lie!"

"Huh?!"

“I’m lying to keep you safe. Let’s tell everyone that it was Prince Shida’s holy magic and not your tonic that restored my face... At least until you become a famous alchemical apothecary and have enough people to keep you safe.”

“...All right.”

People who would keep me safe...? Isn’t Nakona good enough?

That thought crossed my mind, but...no, I couldn’t rely on Nakona forever. She was a girl, too. I understood what Lico meant. Maybe it was because of my mental age? Maybe not. Even in terms of my mental age, I wasn’t on Lico’s level, either.

“I’ll be fine. And my goal is to heal Dad’s arm. So, I’ll keep researching the Supreme tonic! So, erm...what I’m trying to say is, please keep teaching me more about alchemy! Please!”

“...Yes. Of course I will,” Lico said with a smile.

♣Help! My Daughter's In Her Rebellious Phase!

I was depressed.

Pops and Ma worked with their friends to clear this land and build the Rofola Lodge. And in the space of one day, my parents' legacy was half-ruined.

"Fixing this is gonna bottom out my retirement money, isn't it...?" I grumbled to myself.

"Imma help you, so you won't need much money," the dwarf, Ledo, told me.

"Aren't we going to at least buy metal fittings?" I asked him.

"Ah, yeah, I suppose we don't have tools or the metal to make fixtures... Ah, do you have tools?!"

"I should have some tools, yes. Follow me..."

Having a dwarf present just as this happened was the silver lining in this rotten situation. The boy—though he was an adult in human years—followed me as I checked the shed for tools.

First, though, we'd need to remove the rubble. Thankfully, the young knights could help me do that. We could just start by moving the cottage debris all to one spot.

Then we could see what wood could be repurposed and use what couldn't be as firewood. The rest of the lumber we needed for rebuilding could be obtained from the forest. *In fact, if we chop down the trees near the orchard, we might be able to expand our sugar cane field.*

"Marcus."

"Mm?"

There was only one person in this inn who would call me by my name like that. I got to my feet with an ax and saw in my hands when I saw Lico, dressed in light clothing, following Ledo.

Perhaps owing to the dusk light, her shadow stretched into the shed, and the light shining from behind her made her face incredibly clear to the eye. Her long bangs covered her face, but beneath it, I could see her features were clear and unblemished on

both sides. The burned, charred scars that'd mangled her face from the cheek down for so long were now gone without a trace.

It was the face of a beautiful woman.

"...O-Oh, hey."

I experienced an odd sense of elation when I saw the soft look in her eyes as she watched me. She was always a pretty woman, after all. The left side of her face was always beautiful. So, why did seeing both sides look perfect make me react like this? What was wrong with me?

By the time I met Lico, her face was already scarred. *So, this was what Lico looked like before we met...that must be why I feel like something's changed.*

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"About tomorrow..."

"What about tomorrow?"

"We'll help you clear the rubble," she offered. "Cleaning up the aftermath of a monster subjugation is part of a knight's job. And Prince Shida said we should cover up the hole the earthworm left behind... Considering how big it was, patching it up won't be easy. So, the prince suggested he'd use magic to do it. Will you take him up on that?"

"The earthworm's hole... *Tch*, right, that's another problem..."

The damn worm monster burrowed through the ground and left a large hole in the plaza in front of the inn. We would need to cover it up, wouldn't we?

"You should accept Prince Shida's offer. Having someone who can use magic helps out a lot," Lico said.

"It sure is helpful," Ledo chimed in. "Well...except there's a lot of Camilla on the human continent, so the Air's purity is pretty low..."

"...Which reminds me, Sir Ledo. What do you mean by, 'There's a lot of Camilla here?'"

As Lico turned to look at Ledo, I felt a mixture of relief and disappointment at having her eyes leave me. I already knew the left side of her face, and her right side now looked just the same... Why was I so shaken by seeing her like this? *I was the one who pushed for her to do this, after all.*

"Huh? Well, the concentration of Camilla on this continent is a lot higher than it is back home. That's why the monsters are bigger, and it's harder to gather in the Air when you want to use magic."

“What? So that’s why the monsters are breeding faster and getting bigger? Wh-Why?”

“Hmm, well, I don’t know. I’d think you humans would know better. It’s your continent, after all,” Ledo said with a lilt.

“...Is it because Edesa Kura’s starting a war? But this didn’t happen ten years ago, right?” Lico turned to look at me.

“Y-Yeah, it didn’t...” I nodded.

From what I could remember, the monsters didn’t increase in number or size during the last war with Edesa Kura.

“The Camilla has a chance of turning to Kathra...” I muttered. “I heard you guys saying something about human and demi-human malice having an effect on magic? I’m not too bright when it comes to magic or alchemy, but I do know those things exist. Does that have something to do with all this?”

“Shida says that when you humans made your countries, you invented your own ‘gods’ to make it easier to rule the people. These ‘gods’ work as human malice and fill the human continent with Camilla. Our countries and the Elven King warned you about it many times, but you didn’t believe us... No, you wouldn’t admit we’re right!”

“...You’re saying our Gods are the Camilla? W-Wait, no, that makes no sense. Why would our Gods be the Camilla?”

“Because Wisty Air has only one god. The creator god, Air. You made false gods to subvert Air, and *they* became the Camilla,” Ledo explained.

“So you’re saying the Gods of De Marl...are just complete lies?!” Lico retorted, bearing down on Ledo.

I was just as shaken as she was by this. And yet, oddly enough...it felt like what he said made sense. True, faith was a comfortable means to unify people. Each country worshipped its own gods. If I remembered correctly, Edesa Kura worshipped a deity called the God of Kura.

Each country had its own god...which *did* make it seem like they were made after the fact. And the creator god of this world was said to be a deity called Air—the one god that was always passed down as some kind of legend in every country.

Meanwhile, the demi-human continent seemed to have a faith based around Saint Akari-Berz. But that wasn’t a god, but rather a religious figure... In other words, only the human continent used gods as a means of ruling over people.

"A pious heart is important, but forcing it onto others only brings conflict. Just look at Edesa Kura," Ledo said. "They use the name of their God of Kura as a reason to claim humans should reign supreme... It's terrible."

"...B-But that's because the God of Kura is *evil*..." Lico stammered.

"Lico, demi-humans have their own culture. We've lived in peace for so long thanks to the Gods of De Marl. It's like Ledo said. Piety and faith aren't bad in and of themselves."

"M-Marcus..." She looked at me, confused.

"That's not the problem," I said firmly. "The human continent's gods have been worshipped for thousands of years. But only recently have the monsters been growing in size and number. That's the real issue."

Lico bit her lips bitterly.

"You're right. That is strange," Ledo agreed.

The sudden increase in monsters might not be unrelated to the Air decreasing in purity, but if that's the case, why now? These gods have been worshipped for centuries, and maybe that contributed to the growing impurity. But why did the change become so extreme in the last decade?

"Something might have happened ten years ago..." I muttered. "Something that changed the way the world works."

"...And we should be looking into whatever that something might be... Is *that* what you're saying, Marcus?" Lico asked.

"That's my take on it. If you think it's worth investigating, could you have Dir look into it?"

"...Mm. It's a possibility worth investigating. The magic users *have* been saying magic has been weakening every year."

"Maybe you could ask Shida, too?" Ledo proposed.

"Yeah, he's been chosen as the Elf of the Sun, so his point of view would be valuable here. Maybe he can come up with a different explanation."

Good grief... What's a simple innkeeper like me doing, discussing the way the world works?

Lico pensively crossed her arms and placed a finger on her lips.

Yeah, she's stunning. My mind went back to her looks. *Once she goes back to De Marl, she's bound to get a marriage proposal or two.*

She was still single when I joined the knights, but her face was

already charred. We were assigned to our separate knight orders, then I married Kelt, and Lico married that scumbag Rondered...

She'd frequent the other knight orders' barracks to drown her sorrows in liquor—most often to the Azure Knights' barracks, which was how I got to know her better. As it turned out, she wasn't a strong drinker, which put poor Dirbleu in a bind all the time.

She had lived her life devoted to her research, eventually becoming a lass who never knew love. Her parents prodded her into accepting a loveless, political marriage. Still, Lico tried to get her husband to love her...to no avail. And so, she spent those days sobbing into one hand and holding a bottle in the other.

I hope you'll get to meet a man who loves you and looks only at you this time...

But she shouldn't have any problems. She's pretty and she's a lady at heart, too. Ronde's a bloody fool! He let a beauty like Lico slip away...

Not that Kelt wasn't plenty pretty and cute...

"Mm? What's wrong, Marcus? You need something else?"

"H-Huh?! Wh-What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you've got something to say, say it. Ah. And, *umm*, about what I said before... All those times I told you not to boss me around. You still commanded everyone well. You're as skilled as you were in your heyday. Honestly...you saved us back there. So, I suppose what I'm trying to say is...I'm sorry. For what I said about my scars and everything I said before that. I apologize. And I'm grateful, too... Thank you."

"Y-Yeah..."

Ah, dammit!

She's so cute!



"SO, that's my problem. What do you think, Nakona?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Nakona looked at me with a cocked eyebrow, as if I was somehow missing the obvious. "*Propose* to her already! If she goes back to De Marl, she could get caught in another political marriage!"

"B-But, you don't understand...she's a daughter of House Avide, and I'm not even a citizen of De Marl! Besides, Lico thinks of

me as a comrade, a drinking buddy, a friend she can't get rid of. Nothing more..."

"Wow, Dad," Tina said. "I didn't know you were so *annoying* when it came to romance..."

"Th-That's a little harsh!"

As we sat around the table having some tea after dinner, I consulted the girls on what to do about Lico. I figured I shouldn't hold it in and that the girls might understand something like this better than I could.

But I didn't expect this kind of abuse out of you, Tina!

"I-I mean, can you blame me? I spent my whole youth fighting in the war. A-And, how do I put it... I *did* love Kelt, but...she was, well...my first love..."

"Oh gosh! *Daddy!* That's adorable!" Nakona said impishly.

"D-Don't call me 'adorable'..." I groaned.

Tina rested her elbows on the table, holding her cheeks in both hands as she watched us wordlessly.

Wh-What? Nakona's being smug about this, but why is Tina reacting like this?! Is she opposed to the idea...?

I guess it makes sense? I start saying I'm interested in Lico after all this time, and Tina's approaching that problematic age!

"...Still, Lico's pretty bad with romance, too..." Tina said pensively. "Or rather, I think she's still got the Crimson Knights' captain on her mind?"

"Ugh!"

"Ah, right, there's still him," Nakona said.

"How about you show off your manly side?" Tina suggested. "I'm sorry, but all the love potions I can brew are just aphrodisiacs. And personally, I'd like for you to win her over with a masculine confession, but..."

"Tina?!"

Wh-What is my little girl saying?! What was that?! Who put those words into my baby girl's mouth?!

"You should find some time where it's just the two of you, so you can let her see your manly side! Show her you're interested and see how it goes! Listen, Nakona, tomorrow we need to set up a chance for them to be together without anyone else in the way! I had plans to show Lico how I Condense during alchemy, but I'll move it to another time! So, the two of them can go gathering lumber and have a picnic while they're at it! I'll handle the food!"



“W-Wait, wait, wait, wait!”

This is becoming a big deal! Tina, are you more into this than Nakona is?! Th-The two of us, alone?! No, I can't! My heart isn't ready for that!

“Tina, you're asking for too much! The two of us, a-a-alone?! I'd feel too embarrassed!”

“What are you, a girl?!” noth of them lashed out at me.

“Y-You're the girls here!” I retorted.

What are you two saying?! I'm your old man, same as ever!

“A-Anyway, being alone with her is too much for me! Or, well, I mean...what am I even supposed to do?”

“H-Huuh? Daddy, didn't you come to us for advice because you wanted to...I dunno, maybe not remarry, but at least become *involved* with her?”

“I-Involved with her...?! N-No, I mean...don't you two hate the idea of me becoming close with a woman?”

“Not really?” Nakona shrugged. “Lico's fine in my book.”

“I don't mind, either!” Tina exclaimed. “Lico is my alchemy teacher, so you've got my full support!”

“O-Oh. R-Really?”

This feels strangely anticlimactic.

“But really...being alone with her makes you feel awkward? Get your act together, Daddy. You're a forty-something.”

“F-Forty-something?”

“Yeah! Why don't you see how Lico feels? Tina, how about you ask her if she's still hung up on her ex-husband tomorrow while you're doing your Condensing thing? We can plan after we know that!”

“Okay! Adjusting the process is imperative to getting the right result! All right, I'll ask Lico how she feels tomorrow so we can plan accordingly. We'll find a way to make Lico see Dad as a member of the opposite sex. Understood, Dad?”

“Y-Yes, ma'am...”

Th-The girls are awfully dependable when it comes to this... But I don't need anything this full-blown! Are they even listening to me...?



AND so, one week later...

“Well, since Dad is surprisingly useless when it comes to this, we’ve gotten nowhere!”

“Seriously, Daddy! Are you even *trying*?!”

“S-Sorry...?”

Someone, help... My daughters are keener on me getting remarried than I am...

“B-But we’ve always been partners—colleagues. She probably thinks the same, you know? S-So, this is just too sudden... You understand, right?”

“Wow, Dad, you’re a *loser*,” Tina said coldly.

“Bwah?!?”

Is Tina in her rebellious phase or something?! She’s always been such a sweet, polite little girl... Why is she so vicious when it comes to this?!

“At least see her off properly, all right?” Tina stressed. “Promise to keep in touch with her, okay?!”

“Huh? B-But you’re the only one who’s kept in touch with her so far...?”

“What are you saying? You’re the one who needs to keep in touch with her. I’ll write her letters too, of course, but you need to keep writing to her, too.”

“Uhh...”

“What’s that half-hearted reply for? You need to make yourself look good now that she’s going away!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...”

The girls sure are tough on me...

I’d gotten relatively used to writing with my left hand, but it wasn’t exactly easy. As I scratched my head helplessly with my prosthetic hand’s wooden fingers, the girls went out to see the knights off as they were going back to De Marl today. The demi-humans would stay a while longer, since they were going to help rebuild the inn and create the barrier to keep the monsters away.

“H-Hey,” I said as I approached Lico. “You watch yourself on your way back.”

“I will. Thanks for everything this past week. Things look good for the time being, so we’ll be heading back home for now. But let me know if there are any more signs of monster attacks.”

“Sure. I’ll be counting on you for help if that time comes.”

"You keep in touch with me whenever you can too, young miss," Lysteinn said.

"Huh? Ah...sure?" Nakona blinked, seemingly confused.

"Lysteinn!" Two voices spoke as one as Gawain and Vector each grabbed him by a shoulder.

Come to think of it, those three were in the knights since they were kids, so they've been friends for a long time. And Nakona used to play around with the knight apprentices when she was little. Had she stayed in De Marl with her mom, she likely would have become a knight by now.

Thinking about that made me feel awfully emotional.

"..."

"What's wrong, Tina?" I turned to look at her as she stood there brooding. "You look like a Rofola fox when you make that face."

"No, I can just...sense the bad blood ahead," she said in a sagely manner. "As they say, the apple does not fall far from the tree..."

"Huh?"

...H-Her rebellious phase is ahead...?

♣Me at Age 12

“WHOA! D-Dad, Nakona, wait up! There are Beous flowers blooming here! Ah, and that’s Mison grass over there! And Tabbycat herbs!”

“Ah, Tina, you shouldn’t move away from the horses!” Dad said.

“I’ll be right back!”

This might sound sudden, but we decided to temporarily close the inn and go on a family trip. We’d rebuilt the cottages the centipede monster had ruined so they were better than ever...but our customer traffic ran dry because of that incident, and things haven’t been the same since.

We did tell our regulars to let everyone know we had a monster-repelling barrier set up, so it was safe to stay at our inn. But while monsters had indeed stopped being an issue since, bandits became the new problem. Apparently, they kept attacking travelers heading to our inn. They took advantage of the barrier being there to gain a foothold in our area.

So awful! Especially since the knights were too busy to deal with them. Knights were deployed around the land, trying to fight back the ever-increasing monster menace while also keeping Edesa Kura’s militaristic tendencies in check. Handling highway bandits was the last thing on their minds.

And since an armed conflict between nations could break out at any time, fewer people were traveling in general. Lico’s group stopped coming to visit too.

Adventurers became mercenaries hired to guard the different countries and bolstering their forces. Which meant none of them were coming to our inn, either.

Curse you, Edesa Kura... I hate you guys for so many reasons!

“Sorry I took so long!” I said as I hurried back to Dad, Nakona, and the horses.

“Geez, Tina...” Nakona pouted at me. “What are you even going to *use* these ingredients for?”

“*Heh, heh, heh.* Don’t think these are mere weeds!” I boasted. “I can use their oil extract to make cosmetics or pomade. I can also use it to combine ingredients that don’t usually go together, and with larger quantities and a bit more variety, I could make fertilizer. You’d be surprised how useful these can be.”

“*Hmm, really?*”

I got back up on Dad’s horse. Incidentally, our destination was De Marl. I’d been to Fei Lu a few times for doctor visits, but this would be my first time visiting De Marl. One of the most prosperous, lauded, and proud countries in the continent...

But if I had to pick an occasion for going, I wish it wasn’t this one... Why couldn’t this trip be for Dad and Lico’s wedding or something?!

Sadly, Dad was so hopeless when it came to romance, he hadn’t made any progress in two years. *Lico is pretty oblivious when it comes to this stuff, but sheesh! Do either of them actually want to remarry?!*

I looked up at Dad, only to find a sad look in his eyes. The closer we got to De Marl, the thicker that sadness became. Neither Nakona nor I even considered trying to take advantage of this trip to further Dad’s relationship with Lico. We were going to De Marl to attend a funeral, after all.

Dad’s former superior and lifelong friend, Dirbleu Edese, had succumbed to illness and passed away. The now-former captain of the Azure Knights had retired due to his ailing health and devoted all his time to fighting his sickness. The tonic De Marl’s alchemists brewed failed to save him, so, in all likelihood, my tonics wouldn’t have saved him, either.

But hearing his story *did* make me realize I wanted to learn more about alchemy. I could make medicine that cured injuries, wounds, and all sorts of assorted conditions if I had the ingredients, but treating diseases was different. You needed to adjust the cure’s mixture and dosage to suit the patient’s condition, making it extra-complicated.

If Dad were to fall sick, would I...be able to make the medicine he’d need? I wasn’t confident I could. *After all, Grandpa and Grandma passed away when I was little...and if I were better at making medicine, maybe I’d have made something that could save them.*

Well, I was little at the time and didn’t know how to recover mana... Aaah, but, but...!

I bit my lip. On this trip, I *had* to meet the state alchemist Elysis! I still hadn't been able to create another Supreme tonic. What happened two years ago must have been some kind of lucky fluke. I repeated the process, and it only led to high-grade tonics.

There had to be something to it—something I was missing. And so, I'd resolved to have Elysis teach me about making medicine. Of course, meeting a state alchemist and asking them to share their knowledge was easier said than done...but I had to learn more! I *needed* to know more, so I wouldn't regret anything when the time came!

"It's coming into view," Dad said. "That's De Marl."

"Wow..."

At the end of the paved road, at the top of what looked like a hill, and in the center of a plain with good visibility, were the outer walls of a large rampart. The low hills likely surrounded the walls, providing a clear line of sight around De Marl.

Houses were built around the gently sloping hill road. There were mountains in sight—though none of them matched Mount Rofola in size—and several large, castle-like buildings were built into the mountainside.

It looked, I thought, like Middle Ages Europe. I'd never gone abroad, but that's probably what it looked like if history books were anything to go by. To the right of the large buildings was a small lake, much smaller than Lake Rhiede. Next to that was a green garden.

That must be a rich person's house or something. I bet it's a really pretty spot!

"...Ugh, you think Mom's gonna be there?" Nakona asked.

"Well, I assume Ronde is still on active duty...in fact, he's probably the oldest, most experienced captain on duty right now," Dad answered. "Dir and I were his only superiors."

"And Lico's below him, and the youngest one back then was the captain of the Ivory Knights, Sir Lavudo...right?" Nakona asked, familiar as she was with De Marl's knights.

"That's right. The Azure Knights' captain is currently the youngest."

"That's your favorite pupil, Captain Gildias!"

"I wouldn't call him my *pupil* exactly, but... Well, he has grown."

Gildias would sometimes pop up in their conversations. He

sounded like a reliable knight who wouldn't use monster subjugation missions as an excuse to experiment with new weapons like Lico. Or, well, in Lico and Lys's case, they always looked for chances to put their inventions to practical use...

The Azure and Crimson Knights were active units that would go out to the front lines to fight. The Ivory Knights were charged with national defense and the security of important people. The Ebony Knights employed offensive alchemists who created and used alchemical weapons.

Since the Ebony and Ivory Knights had fewer members, people capable of using magic were also relegated to the Ebony Knights. The Crimson and Azure Knights were divided by color, but each order had over fifty knights. That was actually probably *why* they were split into two separate orders in the first place...

The knight orders themselves were divided into numbered units, and the lower a unit's number, the higher it was ranked... which was to say, seen as more skilled. Units numbered below ten were seen as elite units. And the captain and vice-captain of the orders also served as commander and vice-commander of the first unit.

It really put into perspective just how major Dad's old job was...!

Also, becoming a captain meant you were involved with national politics. Unlike other countries, De Marl was a democracy. There was a senate of sixteen people who handled legislation and politics, and three priests handled the justice system. The four knight captains dealt with military affairs.

So, being vice-captain meant...that maybe Dad was savvy about politics? In any case, it was impressive.

While I was thinking about how awesome Dad must've been, we reached the ramparts. A massive gate towered over the large line of travelers and merchant caravans trying to get in. Except these travelers were dressed rather light and had a lot of luggage.

"Refugees are doubling in number..." Dad muttered. "You had to go at a time like this, Dir...?"

"So, these people are refugees?" I asked.

"Yeah. They probably lived in countries near Edesa Kura and fled here for safety. Countries smaller than Uru Ki and De Lulua—countries established during the last ten years of peace—are probably going to be consumed by the war first. Despite going

through all that work to set up...”

“There haven’t been any big military conflicts yet, right?” Nakona asked.

“Who can say? We wouldn’t hear of it that quickly... There have definitely been little skirmishes...”

Dad closed his eyes. We reached the back of the line and got off our horse, Judie, who immediately started eating grass off the wayside. Dad poured some water into a small bucket for Judie to drink from.

The line was pretty long, and there were camps set up just off the road.

“What’re those, Nakona?” I asked.

“Probably refugee camps for people who were denied entry into De Marl. De Marl has limited food supplies, so they have to be careful with how many people they let in. There’s plenty of water in the area, so you can grow crops here, but...with a population this large, families can barely get by. I *do* feel bad for the refugees, but they’ll have to take care of themselves...”

“I see...”

Their crops...

We had some adventurers we knew—Aaron’s party—watching over the inn in our absence, so we didn’t need to worry about our fields being completely ransacked by bandits. But they were definitely pilfering food from our field and orchard. It wasn’t uncommon for some crops or produce to disappear.

But we’re people, not animals! Stealing the food people worked so hard to grow is terrible!

Stupid bandits!

Aaron’s group said they’d be on the lookout for the bandits, so I really hope they catch them! Their hideout is somewhere nearby for sure, so I hope they stomp them out for us! Please!

“Mm? Crops?” I said pensively as I watched Judie and Nakona’s horse, Jeff, eat grass.

“What’s wrong?”

Grass. Weeds. But these weeds all had names, and if I gathered these weeds and transmuted them...

“I know! Nakona! Help me gather all the weeds around here!”

“H-Huh?”

“What are you scheming?” Dad asked.

“*Heh, heh, heh,*” I cackled confidently. “We just need to solve

their food problem, right? Well, I've got a good idea!"

Dad and Nakona both stared at me, their eyes saying "I have a bad feeling about this."

I started pulling weeds with Nakona and some refugee children who approached us out of curiosity. No matter how much was yanked out, there was plenty of grass left on the plains. I tried to focus on the weeds growing between the road's flagstones and put them into my pot.

It was the same portable alchemy pot Giyaga gave me all those years ago! And I had my alchemy stirring rod from back then, too. I sneaked the Beous flowers and Mison grass I picked earlier into the mix as well.

"A bit of water, and...let's get started!"

The nearest refugees started curiously looking at what I was doing. Dad and Nakona wanted me not to do anything that might draw attention.

But I'll be fine!

"It's a beginner's recipe!" I insisted.

Stir, stir. Stir, stir.

I applied mana to the mix and stirred some more. Dad and Nakona anxiously watched me as the pot lit up. The mixture was ready!

"What'cha making? Can we eat it?" one refugee child asked me as he peered into the pot.

Hehe. Well, you see...

"It's fertilizer!"

"F-Fertilizer?" the child repeated.

"Yes, it should increase your crops and make them grow faster. Let's give this to De Marl's farmers!"

"Fertilizer? Oh, like the stuff you use for the sugar cane field?" Dad asked.

"Yeah!"

I knew you'd pick up on it, Dad!

Sugar canes take longer than most vegetables to harvest, so I'd used fertilizer on our sugar cane field to increase its yield and shorten the time it took to mature. The fertilizer's technical name in this world was Puepue, a basic, rudimentary alchemy recipe. I didn't know why it was called that, though.

"Its quality is ideal... Are you sure you want to give this away? It should cost a thousand colts for every two pounds," Dad told me.

“Good point. Since it didn’t cost as much to make, I could sell whatever’s left for half-price.”

“Are you really just going to give the majority of it away?” Nakona asked me. “You don’t even *know* any of the farmers here in De Marl.”

“*Erm*, well...”

She was right. Hearing that there weren’t enough crops to support the refugees made me think that we only needed to increase the yield and make the crops grow faster. But I didn’t have any way of getting this fertilizer to the farmers!

“My, what a surprise!” a knight watching over the line called out to me. “Might you be an alchemical apothecary?!”

“*Huh? Ah...yes?*”

He had an interesting white cloak...he was obviously a member of the Ivory Knights.

“And you’re *this* young? Impressive! Actually, I come from a family of farmers. Could you share some of your fertilizer with me?”

“*Ah*, yes! Go ahead, take some. Oh, but I don’t have a bag for you to carry it in...”

“You haven’t thought of that, either?” Dad chided me.

“*Ugh!*”

Yes, I hadn’t considered they’d need bags to carry it away! Dad and Nakona both shot me exasperated looks.

Look, I regret it, so don’t look at me like that! I know I have an impatient streak!

“I’ll go get you some bags,” the Ivory Knight offered. “How much will it cost?”

“*Erm...*”

“It’ll be 500 colts for two pounds!” Dad chimed in. “And your first two pounds will be for free. And if you come all the way here to pick it up, we’ll make it two hundred colts! If you know other farmers, please tell them about us. We’ll make more in the meantime!”

“Really?! Wow, that’s quite cheap...” the Ivory Knight happily raised his face from my pot, but then his gaze fixed on Dad. “*Huh? Wait, you’re...no, you couldn’t be! Are you...?*”

The knight’s face then turned red, his fingers shaking as he pointed at Dad.

Huh? What’s wrong?

“You’re De Marl’s Azure Demon Wolf! Marcus Ril!”

“It’s been a while, Gibsun! I see you’re doing well for yourself,” Dad said.

“Aaaaaaaaah, Vice-Captaaaaaain! Vice-Captain Marcus is heeeeere!”

“Ah...” Dad watched the knight as he dashed away, running toward the gate.

I asked Dad if he knew him. Apparently, he’d trained this knight when he was a rookie. This was Dad’s old home, after all, so it didn’t come as a surprise he had many acquaintances here.

“He looked like he’d just found some kind of legendary beast,” I said.

“Yeah. I’ll whack him on the head for old times’ sake later.”

A few minutes later, we were pretty much moved to the front of the line and into De Marl. I was shocked by this sudden development. Dad and Nakona insisted we’d stay in line since it wasn’t our turn yet, but three important-looking Ivory Knights appeared, bowing their heads repeatedly and insisting we come in.

“We’re the ones who invited you over!”

“We can’t let *you* wait in line!”

“Captain Gildias and Captain Avide told us to usher you in!”

Eventually, they convinced us. We were invited to the funeral, and having the busy captains come to us would have been too much. Lico and Gildias might have actually shown up to do that if we’d kept saying no...

As we resigned ourselves and started for the entrance, I felt scornful gazes from the refugees. My heart ached from seeing the same children who helped me pick weeds look at me that way.

Still, one little boy waved at me and said, “See you later, miss!”

Is that boy an angel? Aaah, now I feel even worse...

“I never expected your daughter to be an alchemical apothecary!” Gibsun exclaimed. “Are you and your family moving back to De Marl?!”

“Of course not, you idiot. You think I can fight with one arm? And I can’t put my girls in that kind of danger... But Dir was my friend. I should see him off, one last time,” Dad said.

“Awww, c’mon, Vice-Captain! Come back to De Marl! The Azures and Crimsones are at each other’s throats, and we have to

work extra hard because of them!”

“You shouldn’t bother him, Gibsun,” one of the other knights chided him.

“But Luzon, you had to break up their fight just the other day!”

“Well, yeah. But the Azures and Crimson Knights fighting isn’t that weird in and of itself. They’re always competing and pushing themselves to the brink! That’s why they were split into two orders to begin with. But I will admit it’s gotten a bit...worse recently.”

...Really?

I guess the division into colors wasn’t because there were too many knights to keep in one unit but to promote friendly competition. Vector and Gawain were an excellent example of this.

Ah, maybe Kunon and Michael married because of that? They competed and pushed each other to be better...and eventually fell in love and got married! That sounds so lovely... Er, well, I guess that’s irrelevant right now.

“Can’t Gildias keep them in line?” Dad asked.

“No...it might not be my place to mention this, but Captain Ronde’s position, well...it’s gotten worse. Ever since he divorced Captain Avidé four years ago...”

“Oh, I see. He got in trouble with old Captain Gaudy...” Dad said.

Who?

I sent a questioning gaze in Nakona’s direction.

“The Crimson Knights’ former captain. Lico’s father,” she whispered.

O-Oh. Yeah, didn’t Dad say once that the current captain of the Crimson Knights got his position by marrying Lico...? Now I see the problem...

“So because of that, there’s some discord among the Crimson Knights—honestly speaking, they’re riled up. And to let out that stress, they lash out at the Azure Knights, and that makes fights break out,” Gibsun explained.

“So, Ronde’s the one who can’t keep his men on a short leash...” Dad concluded. “And given his age, I’d bet his vice-captain Melant and the second squadron’s commander Jigil want him to step down already. Good grief...now’s not the time for this.”

“Vice-Captain Melant and Commander Jigil have been competing for Captain Ronde’s spot for years...but yes, now’s a

terrible time for this. And Captain Gildias is young, but he has plenty of field command experience. So much so that I hear a lot of the Crimson rookies keep saying they want to transfer to the Azures.”

It looked like things were getting pretty bad. Lico probably didn’t care one bit for these stupid power struggles, and honestly, a kid like me wasn’t interested in them either...

Forget this stuff; where’s Elysis? And when’s the funeral?

Dad hadn’t really specified how long we’d be staying in De Marl.

“So, when are they gonna be holding Dir’s funeral?” Dad asked.

“Tomorrow. We already have a room prepared for you in the cathedral, so you can use it for the duration of your stay.”

“I see. Thanks.”

A cathedral! That sounds kind of impressive! And imposing...

Being an ex-vice captain really was a bigger deal than I’d imagined.

We got on our horses and rode our way up from the gate, onto the main street, and into the inner walls. It was quite the distance... Not that this came as much of a surprise. De Marl was one of the largest countries on the human continent. One could easily get lost without a map.

“B-By the way, Vice-Captain, your daughter—that is, not the young miss, the younger daughter—she’s an alchemical apothecary, right? She makes tonics and the like...?” Gibsun asked.

“Ah, yeah, low-grade ones. Medium-grade ones and higher is a little too much for her.”

“I-I see!”

Excuse you! I might have struggled with those tonics before, but now making them is a breeze for me!

I would’ve said that out loud, but...

“Don’t say anything that might expose you, Tina! Not a word!” Nakona whispered to me with a glare.

“...I know, I know. Lico warned me about it,” I shot back quietly.

My skill as an alchemist was close to a state alchemist’s level. If I wanted to become one, I could probably do so pretty quickly. At least, that’s what Lico had told me.

But this was a bad time to make that decision. Edesa Kura could launch an all-out war at any time, and state alchemists would

be expected to make things besides medicine. They'd make me produce toxins and explosives.

After all, De Marl was still a country. They might advocate for peace, but behind the scenes, they were developing weapons. Which begged the question as to what kind of alchemical apothecary Elysis was, since they'd knowingly become a state alchemist...

This was something I couldn't wrap my head around. So while I was in De Marl, I decided to pretend to be an amateur alchemical apothecary who only dabbled in it. Mister Giyaga also told me point-blank that I was better off hiding my talent.

Oh, and Shida taught me a little magic, so I had to keep that secret, too. Apparently, Sirius was right: I had a talent for magic. But magic was rare on the human continent, so I had to hide the fact that I could use it.

Only five people in De Marl's knighthood could wield magic, based on what Lys told me. *So, if people here found out that I'm an alchemical apothecary who can use magic...they probably wouldn't let me leave De Marl.* Dad and Nakona grimly drove that point home with me, and I certainly didn't want that.

I had to go back to the inn and research how to make a Supreme tonic. *Making toxins and explosives to use in a war? No... that's not for me.* Still, I wanted to meet Elysis so they could teach me how to make disease-curing medicine.

But if Elysis was loyal to De Marl and found out about my talents, they might have me locked up. That was a scary but very real possibility. This was a conundrum. *I have to get close to Elysis. Maybe I could use my child-like appeal to say I want to learn and ask for some books?*

"But being an alchemical apothecary at your age is impressive!" Gibsun said to me. "If you go to a national school, you could reach a state alchemist's level before you know it!"

"A school, hm," Dad murmured. "I *would* like to send her to get an education. But since we got offers from Saikorea and Forestria, if I send her anywhere, it'd be one of those two."

"Whoa! Th-That's amazing!" one of the knights escorting us said.

"Saikorea and Forestria?! Aaaaah! She's a genius!"

When the knights reacted with enthusiasm, Dad had on the embarrassing face of a father gushing about how amazing his

daughter was.

Dad, could you please not expose me after everything you said?

But then...

“Mm?”

“What’s wrong, Tina?”

“Dad, can you stop for a second?”

“What’s the matter?”

I had Dad stop Judie and jumped off, running ahead. Nakona took off after me.

“Tina! What if you get lost?!”

“How would I get lost? It’s a straight road... Excuse me!”

“Aaah?!”

“Eep, yes! Hello...?”

Nakona was a bit of a worrywart. But more importantly, this roadside stall! It was a pharmacy that sold herbs, remedies, and dried leaves! Standing in front of it were three people in cloaks with hoods. One of them was holding out shriveled purple grass. The vendor was shaking his head, saying, “I’m sorry, I can’t buy this off of you.”

I peered closer and confirmed my suspicions.

“Wow! It’s a Tanan vine, complete with the leaf!”

“W-What’s that?! Yuck...” Nakona gagged, catching up to me and looking at it, too.

How can you say that?! This is such a precious, rare herb!

“How much for this?!” I asked the hooded man.

“Huh? What, kid, you know how much this thing costs?” one of the hooded men responded. “This guy says they don’t need this creepy thing.”

“Really? I thought this was a pharmacy, though...”

“I-It is,” the merchant said, a bothered expression on his face. “But I only buy from certified merchants, so I can’t buy ingredients from them.”

“Really? Mister, please let me buy this Tanan vine! Its quality is...”

Appraisal!

I learned Appraisal magic when Shida taught me magic, and now I could manage medium-level Appraisal. *That means I’m better than Dad!*

Hmm! So it’s good quality.

“How about this much?”

“Mm.”

From under their hood, I could see red hair, red eyes, and... sharp teeth?!

What a strange man. Is he a demi-human?

But if he was a demi-human, it explained how he had something as rare as a Tanan vine...except these vines only grew in the eastern jungle. And demi-humans lived on the western continent.

Maybe he's just an adventurer?

“Hey, Eure...how much is this?” the red-headed man asked.

“I believe it's 5,000 colts, Master Vireus.”

“Is that cheap or expensive, Master Renge? Huh? Where's Renge?”

“He stayed glued to the sweets stall we passed by earlier.”

“Oh no...”

“Mm?”

They looked like a pretty strange party. There were two other people wearing hoods, their bodies completely covered by robes. The man called Eure had white hair and thin, narrow eyes. He put a hand to his lips, apparently contemplating what to do. He probably didn't want me to convince him to sell it to me for cheaper than it was worth.

But as far as I knew, Tanan vines cost 2,000 colts, maybe a bit more depending on quality. *I gave my price thinking we could start negotiating from there, but maybe they don't know how much Tanan vines are worth?*

Oh, no! This makes me look like I'm trying to cheat adventurers who don't know any better...

“G-Give us a minute,” the red-haired man said. “We're not quite sure how much it's worth.”

“I'm surprised you tried to sell it, then!” I said.

“No, it's just, er, an estimate. Yes, we had an estimate. We went through a few stores, trying to sell it, and...”

“Oh, I see... Well, I should tell you the value of medicinal ingredients has gone up recently. I could buy it off you for another four thousand colts.”

“Wh-What? The prices fluctuate that much? Mm, what do you say?” the red-haired man turned to the white-haired man.

“Sh-Shinsen, what say you?” the white-haired man asked the third hooded figure, who had light-gray hair.

"I-I don't know...!" he said, visibly confused.

M-Maybe I shouldn't have spoken to them...but I kind of want the vine now.

"What are you even going to use it for?" Nakona asked me.

"Well, I'm researching a composite concoction that should heal both assorted ailments and restore stamina. I figured a Tanan vine might work for it."

"O-Oh. I *did* think you were really focused on medicine making recently..."

The healing salve could heal injuries, but it couldn't recover stamina. Holy magic was faster when it came to recovering that. I assumed a potion that would both heal ailments and recover stamina might be better for fighting off illnesses, and it might be useful for combat too.

I also wanted to make a potion that helps recover mana. Video games often have these potions that heal everything. I remembered how when I was in grade school, boys would talk about recovering "*empee*" using magic potions.

I was interested in making those kinds of magic potions! If I could make those, even amateur alchemical apothecaries could drink them and keep on brewing! It would help everyone!

Though to make something like that, you needed to know magic. And Shida *did* teach me a little holy magic...

The gray-haired man hurriedly left, deciding to bring their leader. As he departed, Dad and the knights approached me. I explained what happened, and Dad simply sighed, said, "Fine, fine, how much?" and took out his wallet. But I refused, insisting I'd buy it with the money I earned by myself, which prompted him to drop his shoulders.

What's that look for? I think I'm doing the proper thing. You're paying for our travel and hotel expenses, so I can't take more from you. We need to keep money for the important things!

"What now? I told you to handle this on your own."

"M-My apologies, Master Renge."

"Didn't I tell you to stop calling me that? I don't like this self-deprecation."

The man who came over with the party member who'd left to fetch him wore the same robe as the others, his hood pulled deep over his face. The one thing he had different was a muffler that hid the bottom half of his face. Aside from that, I could only tell he had

black hair and eyes.

“So, *uh...*” he said, turning to look at me.

“Ah, could you sell me that Tanan vine for 7,000 colts?”

My earlier exchange had made it clear these people didn’t know the first thing about the prices around here, so I added up the normal cost with the price jump and came to that figure.

“That’s honest of you. You realized they don’t know the first thing about trading and came up with that price, right? You’re a kind girl.”

“Huh? Ah, not really...”

He saw right through me. So, this person does understand. His black eyes narrowed as he looked at me...

Wait, those eyes... Where have I seen them before...?

“Incidentally, I also have some powdered Shinan Teras shell. How about I sell you both this and the vine for a total of 20,000 colts?”

“I’ll take it!”

“You said yes, right off the bat?!” the pharmacy owner’s eyes widened in surprise.

“And, 20,000?! Your daughter’s rich, Vice-Captain!” Gibsun marveled.

Powdered Shinan Teras shell! It’s powdered! And my Appraisal says it’s ideal quality, too! Of course I’ll buy it!

“Do you have anything else?!” I asked.

“Yes? Well, I have an Izumi Flint Spark...” he started.

“I’ll take it!” I said at once. “Do you have any more on you?”

“I have two more.”

“I’ll take everything! For 20,000 colts. How about it?”

“Mm. Could you go higher?”

“21,000 colts.”

“Maybe 22,000?”

“Mm... Fine. I’ll pay.”

“Thank you. I think this was a good deal for both of us,” he said, chuckling from behind his muffler.

I took the coins out of my wallet and handed them over, receiving the Tanan vines, Powdered Shinan Teras shell, and Izumi Flint Sparks in return.

Watch and learn, amateur adventurers. This is true bartering!

“No, thank you! This is some wonderful merchandise.”

I found a good deal in an unexpected place. I bowed my head,

and the corners of his eyes softened into what might've been a smile.

I bet he's a really good-looking guy under that muffler.

Wait...a good-looking guy...?

"Excuse me, you mentioned something about a sweets stall?" I asked.

"Hm? Ah, yes... Ahaha, it's a bit embarrassing to admit it, but I have quite the sweet tooth," he said.

"If you ever head west, stop by an inn called the Rofola Lodge! I make all sorts of sweets there!"

"Hm? Sweets? Ah, the Rofola Lodge...yes, I've heard of you. Rumor says you can eat delicious sweets for quite cheap there. But I've also been warned to stay away since bandits are infesting the area."

Ugh! That's a rumor now?!

"But you're the one who makes the sweets?" He squatted down, looking at me at eye level. He really was a good guy! He treated me as an equal, despite my age.



“Yes! They’re homemade, but people like them a lot.”

“That’s an interesting little proposition. I’ll make sure to stop by sometime.”

“We’ll be waiting. *Ah*, but we won’t be back for two weeks, so come after that.”

“*Haha*, good point. If I go there while you’re here, I won’t get any sweets out of it, now would I?”

I knew it!

The more I talked to him, the more I got the impression I knew him from somewhere. *I’ve spoken to him before! But where? If it was the inn, he’d have said he’d been there before. But he said he only heard rumors of it...which means he wasn’t a past guest of ours...*

“Um, excuse me?”

“Yes?”

“Have we...met somewhere before?” I asked him.

“Mm? I don’t believe we have?”

“R-Really?”

Mm, b-but, but I get the feeling we have?

“Oh, right, I’m Tinaris,” I introduced myself. “I make sweets at the Rofola Lodge. So if you pass by, say hello. I also work as an alchemical apothecary, so let me know if you come across any other rare ingredients. We can make another deal!”

“I’ll remember that. Farewell, then.”

“Goodbye.”

Darn. He never gave me his name.

But I did hear them call him “Master Renge.” Master, though? One of the other adventurers, the red-haired one, was called Master Vireus. It was an odd name, though. Renge sounded like a distinctly Japanese name.

“Vice-Captain? What’s wrong?” one of the knights asked.

“What’s the matter, Dad?” Nakona asked, having stopped calling him “Daddy” in recent years.

I turned around to look at Dad, prompted by their questions, finding that he was staring in my direction with a serious look in his eyes.

Wh-What happened? Don’t tell me he...

“Tina...” He said.

“Y-Yes?”

“I think it’s too soon for you...!”

I glared at Dad for a moment before saying, "Let's get going."

"Right," Nakona said, shrugging.

"H-Hey!" Dad called after us.

I don't want to hear that from a man who took ten years to realize he's in love with someone, only to make no progress since!

Besides, that wasn't what happened here... I just got the feeling I'd met him somewhere before. Where, though? It wasn't recent...



"IT'S this way."

Led by two knights, we got on our horses and rode up a hill road. It wasn't that steep, but upon passing through the second gate, we found ourselves in a level, cavernous passage. Maybe they excavated it to get through the hill, or maybe they used it as a tactical tunnel.

Defensively speaking, only a few people could cross through at any given time, so it was a good spot for defending against invading armies.

"Right now, we're in the Second Dominion. Once we cross through here, we'll be in the First Dominion, where the cathedral is," Gibsun said.

"...It's very heavily guarded," I noted.

"Yeah, it is... The First Dominion is where De Marl was founded," Dad explained. "A short distance from here, there's a small mountain called Mount Shifo. Their ancestors cut down the rockface of that mountain, and the land they cleared out became De Marl. Once the population grew, they built the second wall to house the new citizens. After the population grew even larger, they built the third wall. That's why De Marl has three layers of walls."

"And with the new refugees, we're considering building a fourth wall," Gibsun added. "But paving the roads is difficult work... The builders predict the fourth wall will only be completed after twenty years."

"We have many crop fields within the second and third walls, but recently, monsters have started rising from underground..." the second knight chimed in.

Oh, like that nasty earthworm monster...

Thanks to the barrier Shida set up, I hadn't seen a monster in

two years. But apparently, quite a few bug, viper, and earthworm monsters were slithering around the inn's vicinity, off the edge of the barrier. Killing them wasn't an option, so there's not much anyone could do about it, but it was a real problem...

"There it is. That's the first wall," Gibsun said, pointing ahead.

"Woow," I exclaimed.

It really *was* different from the other walls. It looked sturdier and had more of an embellished design. The stone used for it was bluish, and it was actually kind of pretty. Windows filled the walls at set intervals, equipped with glass panes or bars... I could see lace curtains fluttering out of some of them.

"The first wall also doubles as the knights' station and barracks," Gibsun explained. "The Ivory Knights are to the east, the Crimson Knights to the west, the Azure Knights to the south, and the Ebony Knights are to the north. You can't really see the northern walls, though, since they're on the opposite side."

"It's so big...!" I said, marveling. "Wow!"

"It is," Dad agreed. "Inside are the estates of the Foremen who established De Marl. And then you have the Cathedral, the courthouse, the Senate, the bank... It's the heart of the country."

"Wow," I said again.

"You girls will be staying in the temple, which is a part of the Cathedral," Gibsun said.

Apparently, the funeral would take place in the Cathedral, which made sense for a person who helped lead the country...

Elysis will probably attend it. Hopefully, I'll be able to see what kind of person they are during the funeral.

"How long will we be staying here, Dad?" I asked.

"The funeral is tomorrow, so I suppose it'll be two days," Dad replied. "Me staying here for too long might cause trouble."

"Th-That's not true! We *want* you to come back!" said Gibsun, a pathetic whimper in his voice.

As his daughter, I was proud to see my father being depended on and sought-after like this. But I didn't want to stay here too long either, for my own reasons. We'd had to cross three heavily guarded walls just to get this far. As a defensive measure, it was very encouraging, but it also meant that getting out of here would be hard. Put another way, this place could become a prison with three layers of walls keeping me in.

I could understand now why Dad and Nakona looked so

nervous. This was an impressive country, and I certainly had a high opinion of it compared to Edesa Kura...but they might not have been so different in terms of ulterior motives.

"I'll call a priest to show you to your room," Gibsun said.

"Thanks for showing us around when no one asked you to," Dad told him.

"Well, you're guests in our country, Vice-Captain."

The two Ivory Knights left the temple, probably going back to their guard duty.

Since I bought some nice things, might as well Condense them right now. The Tanan vine is fresh, so I wouldn't want it to go bad. It might lose some of its effectiveness...

"Can I do a little alchemy once I'm in my room, Dad?"

"I don't mind, but keep the curtains closed."

"I will!"

Dad called out to a white-robed man standing outside the temple. He was a young man sweeping leaves with a broom. A clergyman, I assumed. He was covered entirely in white except for his face. His outfit looked like a nun's.

The young priest leaned his broom against the wall and showed us into the temple. It looked like a church inside, with stained glass, rows of benches, and an altar in the middle.

And there was this really impressive carving... It looked like a large stone sphere—like a...ball of some sort...?

"Say, Nakona, is that the main god of De Marl?" I asked.

"No, it's above it."

"Above it...?"

Above the ball? Whoa, is that a pyramid?!

A large, triangular object was hanging upside down from the ceiling. It was a bit too thin to be a pyramid, but I could see something like a face above it.

It's kind of creepy...

"Mm? Is this your first time in De Marl, little miss?" the priest asked me.

"Y-Yes." I nodded.

"Would you like me to tell you about it?"

"E-Erm..."

Should I?

Honestly speaking, I wasn't too interested. Like, at all. It was creepy, so I was curious as to why they put something that weird

up. But Shida had told me with steely eyes that all the gods the humans “made up” were basically the Camilla, so I couldn’t view it in a positive light.

Wisty Air had only one god—the creator god, Air. Every other god was only Camilla. Humans twisted that truth, creating gods that suited their purposes and used that faith and piety to create countries. And faith, in and of itself, might be a good thing, but...

“I-It’s fine. My father worships the gods of De Marl, so...”

“I see. Then I’ll show you to your rooms.”

“Yes, if you could, please,” Dad said.

Wow, Dad’s being polite. I guess he feels obligated to treat a priest well.

We passed through a door to the right of the altar and entered a long, white corridor. It extended so long, I couldn’t see the end of it. We ascended a staircase into another corridor made of white stone with black carpet. The right wall was decorated with blue flags, while the left had red flags. The stones used for the walls, ceiling, and floors were all white.

Does this represent De Marl’s purported harmony? It does cover all the colors of their knight orders.

“Over here.”

To the right of where we climbed up the stairs, there was a black door.

Oh, is that Blackwood? That’s really expensive lumber!

“Oh!” I let out a cry.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Tina?” Dad asked.

“Th-This door!” I pointed at the door enthusiastically. “Blackwood is *really* expensive on its own, but this smell and sheen! It’s got Susuri varnish applied to it! A Blackwood door with Susuri varnish... And this doorknob’s craftsmanship! Is that the Sasui engraving they use in De Moph?!”

“I’m surprised you noticed that,” the priest said, visibly impressed.

“Y-Yes, well, we had the inn we run renovated recently...” Dad explained.

I’m so jealous! I really wanted to decorate at least one room with Sasui engraved ornaments!

The delicate gold craftsmanship reminded me of a Japanese shrine, invoking memories of home. But between the cost of the material and the elaborate craftsmanship, they were *far* too

expensive.

But a doorknob...yeah, I didn't think of that! A doorknob might be good...!

"Give it up, Tina," Dad told me. "Remember those...what do you call them? De Moph burned Shunshu plates? You promised you'd give up on the ornaments if I get you those plates."

"Uuu... I know, I know... But..."

Traditional De Moph burned Shunshu plates... Those were plates roasted over a fire using a traditional technique, resulting in precise, special patterns!

Serving food and sweets on that is pretty exciting in its own way!

Ah, if only this world had Instagram...!

We have these pretty plates, but only people who don't know their value can eat off of them! Can't one person comment 'Ah, these are burned Shunshu plates'?!

"Hm. Well, make yourselves at home." The priest bowed and left.

"Thanks," Dad said as he ushered me into the room.

I cast a sidelong glance at Dad and Nakona, who started unpacking their bags. Then I took out my pot.

All right, time to pull myself together and Condense that Tanan vine!



THIS was the first real funeral I'd be attending in this world.

When Grandma and Grandpa died, Dad made a big bonfire and cremated them. I'd thought that was just how De Marl handled funerals, but apparently, I was wrong.

In this country, people don't wear black for funerals. Instead, they wear white. And so, I made my way to the Cathedral in a white conservative dress.

I can't believe the ceremony's being held the day after we got here...it's a miracle we made it in time.

Dad and Nakona were wearing white formal attire and sat in the back row of the cathedral. I thought Dad could probably sit in the front row, but that's where all the important people were...

The front row was full of old men who had medals decorating their vests. I wasn't good with people like them. They were the kind

of people who'd boss around employees whenever they visited a store. They reminded me of these women who went into a restaurant I'd worked at during my past life and demanded the most expensive meat like they owned the place.

...That said, it was a fast-food joint and "the most expensive meat" only cost a thousand yen a plate, which is pretty cheap. If these women were trying to show off, they could have chosen a better place.

"Marcus, Nakona, Tinaris!" a familiar voice called out to us.

"Ah, Lico!" I recognized her approaching us.

"Lico, it's been so long!" Nakona called back.

Oooh! Lico's in a pretty white dress! Dad, why aren't you saying anything? Compliment her!

"H-H-H...Hi... It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Yeah. And it's been even longer since I saw you cleaned up all neat and trim like this," Lico said, a thin smile on her lips.

"H-hey, what is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you only ever dressed nicely like this when you went to parties. Not like I'm one to talk. I don't go to parties, either."

"Y-Yeah, you never *did* frequent them, did you...? Yes, well...I guess you could say that..."

"*Hm?*" Lico looked puzzled by his stuttering response.

...*He's hopeless*, I sighed to myself.

Then again, telling someone they look good in what they chose to wear to a funeral wouldn't have flown in my past life, either. The timing was just bad.

But c'mon, Dad! Couldn't you come up with something else? Something better?!

He was saved by the bell when three familiar guys walked up to us—the tricolored, slightly dumb beefcake knights.

"Hey, young miss. You've gotten prettier," Gawain said to Nakona.

"You really did! First time I've seen you in a dress with that color," Vector added.

"How about you wear a wedding dress instead of an evening dress? Any way you could put it on for *me*?" Lys asked, a sly smile on his face.

"Lysteinn!" the other two knights shouted at him as one, each of them grabbing one of his shoulders.

The three of them attended the funeral clad in their armor. It did look more polished than usual, though, and there were some extra ornamental pieces. Their armor probably doubled as their formal wear.

In terms of behavior, though, they hadn't changed one bit. They might have polished up their armor and were as handsome as ever, but they obviously hadn't cleaned up their act.

"Huh? Why would *I* wear a wedding dress?" Nakona asked, directing a dubious gaze at Lys. "I've got no one to marry! Do you think I'm some kind of dress-up doll, Lys?"

"*Ugh*...you really haven't changed, young miss. You still don't get it!" Lys said, frowning.

"Don't get what?" Nakona cocked her head, oblivious.

Apparently, all *three* of them had a thing for Nakona. And somehow, Nakona failed to notice three guys were hitting on her at once. She brought being unaware to whole new levels!

You don't have to dodge this kind of attack, Nakona! No need to counterattack, either!

Lys was especially on the nose with his courting attempts. Even *I* could tell what he was doing, and it still went over Nakona's head somehow!

"Are you guys on guard detail for the funeral?" Dad asked.

"Yes."

"It's been a while, Vice-Captain."

"You can rest easy," Gawain said. "Or, well, I guess this isn't the occasion to tell you to sit back and relax...but you can see him off with an easy heart."

"Yeah..."

It looked like they'd just come to say hello. Lico moved back to her seat, which was relatively close to the front, while the knights went back to guarding the entrance. The funeral had an ostentatious air to it, what with all the important figures in attendance, but once the procession itself started, it felt like none of that mattered.

The archbishop uttered some words of prayer as the casket was carried over to the altar and encouraged the audience to do the same.

I didn't believe in the Gods of De Marl, but faith was important. And offering up a prayer to the dead wasn't worship, so it wouldn't generate any Camilla. So, I could earnestly and honestly

pray for his soul to rest in peace.

Though I'd never had the chance to meet him myself, Dad, Nakona, and Lico told me a lot about Sir Dirbleu. I thought he sounded like a wonderful man from the stories. The sobs and saddened whispers of the people who saw him off supported my impression of him.

"Captain Dir..." I could hear sorrowful voices speak his name respectfully.

I glanced at Dad, who was eyeing the casket with a pained look. He had a fist clenched in front of his chest, likely his way of seeing his captain off respectfully. Dad didn't need words or tears to say goodbye to his one true friend and brother-in-arms. He probably felt that not making a scene was the least he could do.

And so, with this grave, solemn air, the funeral came to a close without any incident. Dirbleu's soul had already left his body, and he was cremated, so there would be no chance of Camilla occupying it.

In my old world, cremations were a matter of tradition, but here, bodies really could rise from the dead like zombies. Only family members and close friends were allowed to attend the cremation.

"I'll be going then." Dad rose to his feet to attend the cremation. "You girls don't stray too far from the knights, you hear?"

"Suuure thing," Nakona said.

"We won't," I promised.

Dad and Lico were invited by Sir Dirbleu's bereaved family to the cremation. I'd never met him, though, so naturally, I couldn't go with them. Instead, I waited at the reception area, where they served drinks and finger foods. I had a lot of free time during the funerals I'd attended in my past life too, so this was nothing new to me.

Not many people attended my father's funeral in my past life. Still, since it's seen as a place to think of the dead as they depart to the afterlife, funerals have a tendency to become a social gathering of sorts. And this was no exception as people moved from the cathedral into the reception area.

"It's pretty disgusting when you think about it. Here's all this food we couldn't finish off if we wanted to, when there are refugees camping out in front of the gates, starving," Nakona remarked,

crossing her arms grumpily.

“...Yeah,” I agreed sadly.

She wasn't wrong. The refugees I saw the day before were dressed in rags, with large groups surrounding one small pot of food. And the children that helped me gather herbs were so thin and emaciated...

But here at the funeral, there was so much food. Quality, elaborately decorated food served with full bottles of alcohol!

“What do you wanna do, Tina?” Nakona asked me. “Grab something to eat and go back to our room?”

“Yeah, there's nothing but strangers here...” I said.

I wasn't used to these kinds of places, so I wanted to go back to my room as quickly as possible.

Ah, but maybe Elysis is here.

I wondered where the knights were. Nakona said she never met Elysis, but I couldn't exactly walk up to some important-looking old men and ask. So I figured the trio of knights might point me the right way.

“My, young lady, might you be Sir Marcus Ril's daughter?” someone called out to Nakona while we were looking around.

“Huh? *Erm*, yes...” Nakona said awkwardly.

After one person spoke to her, other people also joined in on their exchange.

H-Huh?! Why is there a crowd forming? I'm gonna get separated from Nakona!

“Whoa!” I yelled as I was pushed back by the crowd of people.

“Are you all right?” a familiar voice asked as they caught me before I fell over.

“Ah, Vector...”

I wasn't used to the thick heels I was wearing and slipped, but Vector supported my back. I turned around, only to see the three knights standing there!

“Ugh, they're so shameless. This isn't an evening party,” Vector said, eyeing the men speaking to Nakona with a grimace.

“They've actually been restraining themselves at evening parties, so they probably thought this was their chance,” Gawain said, shaking his head in disapproval. “Still, I can't overlook this. As a knight. In the interests of chivalry, of course.”

“In the interests of chivalry!” Lys nodded vigorously.

Their attitude seemed to scream, “Get away from our young

miss. You haven't tried half as hard as we have, you rich kids!"

But while Vector and Lys had last names and were active knights, the men hitting on Nakona right now were dressed up in expensive suits...so the knights had my sympathy in this particular instance.

"I'll be waiting by the wall. I'm counting on you three to save Nakona from those guys!" I told them.

"By your will, ma'am!" All three of them saluted me at once.

I feel bad thinking this way, but I've seen panes of glass less transparent than those three! I saw them off with a smile anyway.

Still, it'd take the three of them a while to scatter a crowd that size. I leaned against the wall as I watched them approach the group.

Why is Nakona so popular, though?

The first guy called her "Sir Marcus Ril's daughter." Was it because she was Dad's daughter? I knew Dad was a famous knight, known as De Marl's Azure Demon Wolf. But that was over a decade ago. I also knew some people recognized him even after all those years, but...did he still have the authority he had back then?

"Excuse me, little lady?" someone called out to me.

"Who, me?"

"Are you Sir Marcus Ril's daughter? I saw you sitting with him."

Three men dressed in formal attire approached me.

What do they want with me?

I looked in Nakona's direction, but the crowd of people around her hadn't been cleared off yet. *Did they really approach me, specifically?*

"Would you mind speaking with us for a little while?"

"If it's about my father..."

"No, we'd like to talk about you, actually. I'm quite curious about you."

"E-Erm, no, I'm, uh..."

C-Curious about me?! N-No, cut it out, I'm scared...! What do I do?!

How do I turn someone down at times like these? I've never been to this kind of party! If someone hit on me, I'd ignore them until they went away, but this isn't like that! I can't just ignore them! I don't think so, at least!

And they're so much older than me... What do important-looking

grownups want with me?! N-No, stay away from me...!

"Tinaris, there you are!" As I held my shivering hands over my chest, a warm hand grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me along.

"Huh?"

Pulled ahead by this single, smooth motion, I didn't understand what was going on for a moment. It was someone clad in a white suit. His hair was black with a diagonal cut along the right side and braided at the back. He had black eyes, a gentle smile, and a soft tone of voice.

"Do you know these people?"

"N-no."

I glanced at the young man standing between me and the three men who'd talked to me. He had a serene air about him, but something in his silent gaze didn't leave any room for argument.

Oddest of all was how the men who walked up to me gazed at him, stupefied, with their cheeks flushed.

I can't say I don't understand why... He's very...handsome.

And he seemed to be naturally overflowing with a sort of... charm? Whatever it was, it was intense. And he smelled really nice, too.

"If you don't have business with her, would you mind if we left?"

"O-Of course!" the three men said at once, nodding with blushes on their cheeks.

They saw me off silently as the man led me away, holding me by the hand.

Wh-What's with them? A-Actually, forget that...

"...Over here."

He led me to an exit on the other side of the hall. As we passed by the vibrant celebration, he seemed to stand out and draw the attention of the other guests. The women were sending especially passionate gazes his way...and even the men saw him off with a blush.

Wh-What's with this cute guy...?

We entered a corridor, and the sounds of the reception grew quieter as we walked. It was then that he stopped and let go of my hand.

"Erm... A-Are you possibly...?"

He knew my name, and I recognized those black eyes and hair...

"This is my thanks for helping my friends yesterday..." he said, pointing down the corridor.

"Hm?" I peered in the direction he pointed.

It was a long, white corridor that seemed to extend toward a place where a light shined. That was all I could see...

"There's an alchemist's workshop there. You are an alchemical apothecary, right?" he asked.

"Ah, erm, yes!"

"Then why don't you check it out? I'll tell your sister for you."

"Ah, b-but..."

Why is he doing so much for me...?

"It's too soon for you to be in that den of snakes," he said simply, a hint of displeasure in his voice.

"...Right."

"I'll be leaving then," he said, regarding me with a smile. "I'll be looking forward to your sweets."

"Ah, please do..."

That irresistible smile and his words left me incapable of saying anything more.

I knew it, I...I've met him somewhere else before. But where? And was it that long ago that I can't remember?

Black hair was one thing, but black eyes weren't a common color in this world. And he was so handsome...

Wait... A handsome young man?

If I'd met him a long time ago, wouldn't it have been when he was much younger? He looked to be about seven or eight years older than me and slightly younger than Aaron... And while there were other handsome men in this world, comparing them to him and Aaron made me feel like Air was awfully unfair with how much they blessed those two with good looks. Anyway, he probably wasn't much older than Nakona.

So maybe he was younger when I met him, more of a boy...? Was there someone like that? If he grew up to be so handsome, he must have been a cute kid. Doesn't feel like someone I'd forget...

It's driving me bananas... Where was it? Where did I meet him?

It kept bothering me, like a splinter in the back of my mind. I walked down the corridor in the opposite direction of the hall, pinching the bridge of my nose in an attempt to remember.

Where could it have been? I know I met him somewhere...at least, I'm pretty confident I did. It wasn't just yesterday, it had to have been

before that. Probably a long time before. Black hair and eyes...

Where did I meet such a cute guy...?

"Mm?"

I was suddenly distracted by a breeze. The scent of the wind made me let go of the bridge of my nose. It smelled like greenery. Herbs, vegetables, fragrant grass...

Wow!

"This smells like Walpurgis! I can't believe it! Someone actually managed to cultivate it?!"

Surprisingly, I'd found myself in a small garden overflowing with an abundance of different herbs. Plants that couldn't coexist with other plants in the soil were grown in pots, and all of them happily extended their leaves toward the sun.

Plants that couldn't coexist together were the kind that could only be found in the wild, but there were so *many* rare plants being cultivated here. Besides the pots, there was a small glass greenhouse, a vegetable field, and even an aquarium.

Despite being jammed into one tight space, it felt like there was a specimen of whatever plant I could ask for always within reach!

There was a fence on the left side of the garden. Beyond the fence was a body of water, likely the lake I saw from the outside. *We must be pretty high up, then...*

"Who's there?"

Someone's here?!

"Is anyone there? I'm letting you know now, I won't make any explosives or poisons. If you're here on behalf of Gonzorel, you can turn back now—*mm?*"

"E-Erm..."

Th-This is bad...

I reflexively tried to hide, but in my panic, all I really did was pick up a potted plant and hide my face behind it.



This only makes me look more suspicious! What's wrong with me?! This is embarrassing! I'm such a dummy!

"What's this? A kid? Oh, *ahaha!* You probably wandered in here from the dance hall."

"Ah, yes, I'm sorry..." I muttered. "I just noticed you were cultivating rare alchemical plants, and I couldn't help but look..."

The person who spoke to me was an old lady. She wore pink clothes and an apron with a floral pattern on it. For how cute her clothes were, she had a very scary face.

Her collection of plants impressed me, though. She had Lilith, Duana, and Solan flowers, which were easy enough to grow, but her greenhouse was meticulously divided into sections. It struck me as absolutely genius.

With a garden like this, I could brew all the medicine I'd want without ever needing to go out to collect more!

How come I didn't think of making a greenhouse before?! Am I really that much of a dummy?!

But what made this *really* impressive was that she was cultivating rare plants like Walpurgis, Napola, and Walkure! I never knew it was possible to grow those. I was so shocked, I couldn't even begin to hide my surprise!

If she can raise these plants, she must be amazing!

"Hm, you can tell these are alchemical reagents at your age? Who are you? A new whelp who joined the knights?"

"Ah, *erm*, no..."

What do I tell her? I mean, I'm definitely here without permission... I guess I should use the fact I'm a child, introduce myself, and explain how I got here. What if Dad and Nakona won't be able to leave De Marl because of me?!

"Well, I..."

Of course, I'm going to keep my talent as an alchemical apothecary secret! But I don't have to lie about everything else.

"I see," the old woman said after hearing my explanation. "So, you got lost."

"*Ugh!*"

Does this count as getting lost?! I mean, I do know how to get back; it's just...

"I'd like to go back to my room without passing through the reception hall..." I confessed.

"I see. Your eye and hair color are extremely rare... And you have a substantial amount of mana, though most people in this country won't be able to tell. You're no ordinary human, are you?"

"Wh-What?!"

I felt a chill run through my body. This must be what having all the blood drain from your face feels like. It was an entirely different sense of fear and tension from what I'd experienced surrounded by those men in the reception hall.

"E-Erm, how do you...?"

"Are you that Tinaris girl Licorice told me about? The girl Marcus adopted...? I'm called Elysis. Licorice said you wanted to meet me, but..."

"Huh? Huh?!"

All the heat that drained from my body skyrocketed all the way back up to the top of my head.

Elysis?! This is Elysis, the state alchemist?! Huuuuh?!

But that explained this garden and all its rare plants. *This is a state alchemical apothecary's garden!*

"Make me your apprentice!" I said at once.

"No," she replied flatly, shooting me down as soon as I asked.

Turned down this fast?! Aaah, I might've been a little too excited. Calm down. Chill. Don't talk in the heat of the moment...

"I make it a point not to take apprentices. If you want to learn alchemy, there are national schools for that."

"Ah, er, I'm sorry... But your garden was just so lovely, I couldn't help but say it..."

"Huh? What does *that* have to do with apprenticeship...? My garden, you say? My garden, *mm... Heh heh*. I see. So you can tell."

"Tell what?"

I can tell? About the garden? What does she mean? Of course, I would know its value. Any alchemical apothecary should be able to tell how amazing this garden is with just a glance!

"Come, come," Elysis beckoned me. "I can at least treat you to some tea. It'll be a while before the reception ends, so take your time. I'll hear you out."

"Th-Thank you!"

She looked a little scary, admittedly, but Elysis was as kind as the flowery apron she wore suggested. She turned around and entered what looked like a little hovel painted in white. It looked like it was covered by creeper vines, and the paint had crumbled off

the walls in a few spots.

But on the inside, the hovel looked fine. It was cramped, though, with ingredients and books filling the shelves and hanging from the ceiling. In that regard, it was just like the garden. And there was a huge mountain of books on the floor.

“Are you bad at tidying up?” I asked.

“It becomes too much of an effort once you hit a certain age,” Elysis admitted, shaking her head.

“...You said you don’t take apprentices, but an apprentice could clean up for you...”

“No, I don’t want *that*. Any apprentice of mine will become the next state alchemist. No, I think I’ll be fine being the only one who has to bear that title.”

“.....”

So, that’s *what she meant*.

I turned my eyes toward her pot. It was a large, black cauldron that looked like it’d been in use for a long, long time. There were other pots of different shapes and sizes hanging from the ceiling. This was what a professional alchemical apothecary’s workspace looked like.

Different pots served different purposes. I wish I knew what they were all for. The shallow pot was likely for making seasonings, while the deeper, larger one was for brewing medicine, since the size helped produce more. Meanwhile, the one with the round bottom was likely for making powders.

Elysis also had various alchemical rods for different purposes. Wooden ones, iron ones, long ones, short ones...

Did I go to heaven or something?!

“Here you go,” Elysis said, handing me a cup of tea.

“Ah, thank you!”

She ushered me to a small table by the window. There were bottles lined up on the windowsill, full of dried newts, snakes, frogs, lizards, centipedes, and the like.

Are these ingredients for potion-making...?

She put cookies and a teapot on the table and urged me to take a seat on the stool opposite hers. But the sheer dissonance of delicious cookies being set in the same place as dried reptilians and bugs—an attack on one’s sense of vision if ever there was one!

“These are all ingredients for a cure to Dragonmatch disease. They’re used to make a powder to treat it,” Elysis explained,

noticing that I was looking at the bugs.

"I-I see...! Actually, I've been meaning to research cures for diseases recently. Can you recommend a good recipe book for those?"

"No, because there really *isn't* one. Oh, you can find plenty of books with medicine recipes, but the only *real, effective* medicine can only be made by an apothecary who treats a patient over time. You won't find a cure for a disease that works on everyone in any recipe book."

"...Oh, I see...but I'm still a novice, and the only things I can really make are tonics to heal wounds..."

Medicine to cure assorted ailments purge the body of foreign substances. Antipyretics work similarly, but how effective they are depends on the person. Some people have physiologies that resist them naturally, and even a high-quality one won't be very effective.

When I was little and dabbled in alchemy for the first time, the recipe for Grandpa's powder already had the dosage written on it. It wasn't just a recipe for a respiratory disease—it was adjusted to the particularities of Grandpa's body and lungs. That was something I hadn't really considered until now.

What if, heaven forbid, Dad developed the same illness Grandpa did? He'd probably need a dosage that would be more effective for him. But put conversely, giving him the wrong dosage might be ineffective or even make his condition worse.

I shared these concerns with Elysis, and she cracked a smile.

"That whelp Marcus raised a good girl in you."

"Umm..."

"Listen here, Tinaris. Just like you said, medicine is a poison of sorts. And the reverse can apply, too. Poison can, at times, serve as a cure...depending on how they're brewed. Sometimes, either one can kill a patient. I've made mistakes that have cost someone's life before."

I gritted my teeth and hung my head. It was a terrible thing to imagine.

"But there were still patients who begged me to make them medicine. Even when I felt like I never wanted to brew another vial of medicine in my life, people came to me. 'It hurts,' they said. 'Help me. Make it better.' The one who taught me how to make medicine was this country's former state alchemist, who was another alchemical apothecary. He loved this country very much..."

He worked hard to save even just one of this country's people, praying all the while."

Praying all the while... Praying while making medicine...

Come to think of it, when I made the medicine for Grandpa, I prayed too. I was anxious since it was my first time, and seeing Grandpa's suffering weighed heavily on me.

I wanted to save him. To do what I could to help him. He was the father of the man who adopted and raised me. I wanted to help him, to repay everything he'd done for me...and with that devotion in heart, I'd...

"Being afraid is natural. It's necessary, even," Elysis admitted. "And I can see you understand that perfectly well. Then let me ask you this. What do you think of when you brew medicine? What motivates you?"

"...I might have forgotten. When I first made medicine, I wanted to save my sick grandfather. But recently, all I've been fixated on is quality and how to produce more of it. It's like all I've been thinking about is producing rare medicine..."

"I see. But still, you were worried about what might happen when Marcus gets sick and wanted to learn how to cure illnesses."

"Yes. I mean, Dad only has one arm. He's more likely to get infections than most people. Dad adopted me and raised me. I owe him so much... To be honest, I wish I could make a Supreme tonic to restore his arm, but..."

"Right."

She picked up her cup, took a sip, and placed it back down on its saucer. Elysis's expression was gentle and calm. Even now, the Supreme tonic was still an illusory concoction. *I still haven't made another one!* It frustrated me because I couldn't remember how I made it the first time.

If only I had that, I could restore Dad's arm...!

"A Supreme tonic, eh...?" Elysis said upon my mentioning it. "If you ask me, I'd say you might be able to do it."

"H-How come?"

She sounded so confident about it, but then I remembered she said I wasn't a normal human earlier. And that made fear surge up in me again. Still, Elysis didn't look like she wanted to use me in any way...

I then realized that not drinking the tea or eating the cookies she served me would be rude. Still, I couldn't help but be suspicious

and fear for the worst...

"Tell me, did Licorice never say anything to you?" Elysis asked.

"Say anything? Like what?"

"Mm. I suppose that lass was always too fixated on using alchemy for combat... Perhaps she just wasn't that interested in it to begin with."

S-Stop leading me on! What is it?! Did you realize something?! Did you...realize I'm one of the Spherit Folk?!

"Alchemists and magic users are falsely similar. They are similar in that they both draw on the Air, and the Air I feel coming from you is exceptionally pure...! That's not something that can happen with normal people."

"Ah...!"

She mentioned purity!

After I realized that I was probably one of the Spherit Folk at the age of ten, I'd looked into them and learned some astonishing truths. The Spherit Folk were a unique people, capable of infusing ordinary stones with their uniquely pure Air and turning them into Spherit Stones.

Humans typically use the Air in their body to perform techniques, and demi-humans have larger reserves of Air than humans do. But while the Spherit Folk were considered demi-humans, they didn't rely on the Spherit Stones to use magic, like the elves do.

That's because Spherit Folk were considered to be similar and close to the Spherits themselves. While elves and humans had to rely on the aid of the Spherits and the Spherit Stones to use magic, the Spherit Folk could forgo the process of calling on the Spherits to draw on the Air.

It kind of feels like cheating...

It was said that the Spherit Folk were created long ago through the intermingling of humans and Spherits. They were a wondrous race skilled at magic and alchemy, capable of handling the Air better than even the Mythical Beasts.

But much like how the Spherits were considered part of nature and an aspect of the world's natural providence, the Spherit Folk saw themselves as part of the mechanism that kept the world alive. As such, they were seen as slightly emotionless.

An entire race of people with terrible communication skills!

To that end, they were estranged from both mankind and the demi-humans and lived quietly in a forest on the human continent's westernmost tip.

Dad told me about the adventurer his brother was friends with, Jinray. I suspected he was my real father, and based on hearsay, he fell in love with the Spherit Folk's princess at first sight!

He courted her aggressively and indeed won her heart! Humans are an emotional race, and his feelings triggered emotions within the princess as well. Said princess was probably my mother. The woman who cried for me back then...

"...I don't really know why myself," I told Elysis, shaking my head.

"Well, maybe so. But either way, I think you can concoct medicine I could never make. And by that, I mean you could probably successfully produce a Supreme tonic."

"You think so?"

"Well, it's hard to say for sure. But if nothing else, you're much more likely to make one than I am."

"Is that because the Air's purity is degrading?"

"Yes, it is. The Air on the human continent is considered to be rather impure. Demi-humans and mages draw on the Spherits and the Spherit Stones to cast magic, so they're very sensitive to it."

"But isn't alchemy also impacted by the purity?" I asked.

"Well, you see, I don't know much about the techniques knights use for combat, but the impurities in the Air don't impact alchemy as much. Especially things like the alchemical weapons Licorice uses. Those can operate so long as they have access to the Air, no matter how impure it is."

"Alchemical weapons..."

I wondered if the Air Gun Lico used was officially called that, or if that was simply a colloquial name, since it drew on the Air. Either way, I'd have preferred it if alchemy was used for more peaceful purposes. *Like to make an oven or a stove or a light bulb.*

"A half-elf scholar I met once told me it impacts the quality of the things you produce," I said.

"Well, yes, it would. Imagine if you used dirty water for a concoction. It would fail, right?"

"O-Of course it would."

"That's why, sooner or later, alchemical apothecaries will be gone from this world," she stated blandly.

"They will?!" My eyes widened in shock.

"...I can still make do for the time being, but the quality of my medicine has been going down with every passing year... The way things are going, this profession will die out without ever achieving a Supreme tonic.

"Everyone's fixated on establishing the method, but if you ask me, I think the Air's purity is the greatest factor in its creation. That's why I think *you'll* be able to make it. You're free to believe me or ignore me, but...if you do, you should believe in yourself too. Try to do it. You want to restore your father's arm, right?"

"...Yes!"

She didn't ask about my past. I didn't think she'd just give me free advice like this...

"Erm, I'll have some tea, then!"

"Go ahead; drink it."

I took a sip from the teacup.

Mm! It's good!

"It's delicious! This is herbal tea, right?"

"Right you are. I dry herbs to make it."

"Ah...!" My eyes widened in realization.

"Mm?"

I can't believe I haven't thought of that sooner... How could I have overlooked it all this time? I can make tea leaves with alchemy...and what goes with tasty sweets? That's right: tea!

"There's something I need to ask you!" I exclaimed, leaning forward.

"What's gotten into you, girl...?" Elysis asked, taken aback.

"Could you teach me the recipe for these tea leaves?! And if you could, how to grow herbs, seedlings, and tea leaves?!"

"Hm? Well, if it's just cooking-related, I don't mind. Very well, wait a moment."

All riiiight! Thank you, Elysis! If we sell a set of sweets and tea for a thousand colts, our customers might come back!

Elysis was a surprisingly nice person. I could talk to her naturally, even though I'd only just met her.

Oh, that's why...

She reminded me of my Mom from my past life. Her husband died before she did, and she had to raise a daughter who was in the most sensitive phase of her life. It made her strong-willed.

I miss you so much... Are you all right without me...? I can't

remember your name or face, but don't worry! I'm doing well here.

"Will this do? Also, you mentioned seedlings, but do you have any idea about how to raise them?"

"Yes. I think I'll be fine. I'll read up on it again, but we already have a field and an orchard at home. Tea leaves need to be planted on high ground though, right?"

"Yes. The three high-quality blends grown in De Marl are..." she started saying, but I quickly finished her words.

"Zedara, Kanima, and Riputo. Zedara are bitter and need to be raised away from direct sunlight, so they're not as tasty, but they're good for recovering stamina. Kanima can be grown in the lowlands, and since they're rich in fiber, they're good for treating constipation. Riputo is a strong strain that can be raised even in bad environments. They're good for relaxing the mind and have a strong, distinct aroma."

"Oooh...? So you do know about teas. Very well, I'll give you a sample of each."

"Really?!"

Oooh, Elysis is so generous!

I wanted to raise my hands and cheer, but I gave up on that idea, given how cramped this hovel was. My gaze then fell on a bottled snake sitting on the windowsill. *Even if they're used for medicine, I have some pretty bad memories of snakes and centipedes...*

"I see you're knowledgeable about ingredients...no, about plants. I like that. You can have this, too."

"Huh? Wait, is this...an Eve flower?!"

Eve flowers are a legendary type of flower made by crossbreeding Lilith, Duana, and Solan flowers. It's said a single Eve flower exhibits the properties of all three of those flowers at once. It was very rare...so much so that no one would dare use it to make medicine.

Elysis handed me a flower pot, though. And while it was small, the fact it was planted into a pot meant I could collect its seeds if it grew well. And with seeds, I'd be able to plant more Eve flowers!

"This is the only one I have. Sadly for me, growing it in this state would take all my time, and I have the other plants to tend to... So, could you take it off my hands and grow it for me?"

"Ah, ah, a-are you sure? It's very rare, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm sure... The alchemical apothecary apprentices in the national school all trample over this garden without a second

thought. But you realized the meaning behind the grass growing here as soon as you saw it.”

I fell silent as Elysis got up and opened the window. The scent of nature wafted into the hovel. Outside this window was a treasure trove of a garden. I picked up the potted plant and stood next to her.

There are alchemical apothecary apprentices that don't see the value of this garden? That's possible?

“It's the way the wealthy think...” Elysis said pensively. “The young ones in the national school seem to think you can get ingredients like these with money, but that's not true.”

“Why won't you teach them yourself, Elysis? If you just explain things to them, I'm sure they'll—”

“I suppose the biggest reason is that I'm simply too busy. Especially now, when we're preparing for war. They keep asking me to make them gunpowder... Actually, I should be making some right now. But I can't neglect hospitality when I have a guest, now, can I?” she added with a wink.

“Y-You were in the middle of work?! I'm sorry!” I apologized profusely.

I can't believe I've been such a bother to her! But...huh...?

“Elysis, aren't you going to Sir Dirbleu's funeral...?”

“No. Even if I don't go, there are plenty of people to see him off. I love De Marl as a country, but I don't worship the Gods of De Marl. I don't *care* about their stupid rituals!”

“Huuuuh?”

I didn't believe in the Gods of De Marl either, but still! A funeral—or rather, the cremation was necessary so he wouldn't become a zombie. I asked Elysis about this, and she gravely nodded.

“Cremation is important; that much is true. If you ask me, I don't want a funeral. Just burn me and be done with it.”

“Th-That's wild...” I said, marveling.

“They've worked me to the bone. I shouldn't need to play along with their ego in the afterlife. I've told this to Licorice plenty of times, too... All she tells me is to just live long.”

“I agree with her! Please live long!”

“Haa... Awful, awful. Cracking the whip on an old hag like me, are you?”

“Ah, I didn't mean it like that!”

“Hmph, I was joking... Well, either way, when I die, I'll be

leaving this place to Licorice. If you find a book or an ingredient you want, feel free to take it. Assuming you come to this country again.”

“Elysis, what do you...?”

How much does she know?

“Tinaaaa! Huh? This is weird; what is this place?”

“Oh, Lady Elysis’s workshop should be that way. Lady Elysis?”

“Lady Elysis, are you there?”

Ah, that voice...!

“Nakona!”

I left the garden, the potted plant in hand. Nakona was in the corridor leading to the garden, clad in her white dress and accompanied by the three knights. Spotting me, Nakona grinned and waved.

Wait, this is kind of crazy.

I always knew Nakona was pretty. She had pink hair and violet eyes. She was petite and baby-faced, which made people mistake her for my age at times. There were a few times people thought I was her older sister, actually.

But now, Nakona was heading toward me with three beefcake guys in tow. Two guys who were diametric opposites of each other and one prankster. Now, I wasn’t savvy when it came to video games, but I remembered seeing a commercial just like this when I was flipping through my phone—an ad for an otome game!

“I’m glad I found you,” Nakona said. “I guess that guy from earlier was right.”

“Ah, yeah. That man helped me!”

The cute guy with black hair and eyes. I still didn’t ask for his name, come to think of it...

“I see someone came to pick you up,” Elysis said, having followed me out of the hovel.

“Yes! I’m sorry I intruded on you in the middle of work...”

“Don’t worry about it. The only thing they’re having me make is explosives for the war. Isn’t that right, young Lys?”

“Ahaha,” Lys chuckled wryly. “We *do* need those, though. Edesa Kura’s mechanized troops and their mechanical dolls are heavily armored. Nothing but your explosives could penetrate their defenses.”

“My word,” Elysis huffed at him. “You and Licorice are

alchemists too! Why don't you two learn how to make explosives! Young alchemists like you ought to know how to do it, I dare say!"

"Yes, yes, I'll study hard," Lys said wearily. "I'll remember everything you teach me about blowing things up. Explosions are entertaining."

"You know what? Maybe you shouldn't learn anything," Elysis said, glaring at him.

"Aw, that's mean."

I-I'm inclined to agree!

"What do the lecturers even teach in that school of ours...?" Elysis grumbled, scratching her head. "If only they taught you how to use alchemy to make life better for the people..."

Lecturers... Right, this country has a school that teaches alchemy. School... Lecturers...

Those words clicked together in my mind.

"Hey, Elysis! You mentioned lecturers, so that means there's a school in this country too, right?"

"Ah, yes, there is. There are academies that teach you how to use a sword, a shield, a spear, a bow, magic, or alchemy. Knights have to pick one field to specialize in. That limits what knight order and profession they can join, though. That said, once they learn, they're technically free to quit the knighthood," she explained.

"I know this sounds like a different topic, but refugees are lining up outside the country. I hear De Marl lacks the food to welcome them," I said.

"Mm? Yes, that's right. Monsters are invading from underground, making it harder to farm..."

"Can't you have De Marl's alchemists make fertilizer?" I asked.

Elysis stared at me for a moment, an odd expression on her face. Lys then clapped, as if to say, "Oh, right, that was an option!" Gawain and Vector exchanged confused looks. Elysis's strange expression soon changed into a smirk.

"Might be a good idea. Whether you're an alchemist or an alchemical apothecary, fertilizer is a novice's recipe. Even they could make it. It might even teach them to distinguish between herbs. It'd make for some good field study! And with fertilizer, we'll have more food to go around. I'll send a message to the knight's academy right away."

"Thank you!"

"Still, I can't promise you there'll be any fewer refugees."

There's still no housing to accommodate them."

"Ah..."

R-Right.

Food wasn't the only issue. *And I thought it was a good idea...*

"Then there's no problem at all," Lys said. "With the preparations for the war, the knights, the blacksmiths, and the farmers need extra hands to go around. I can ask my foster father to prepare some workplaces for the refugees. I'm sure they won't struggle to find work; everyone's looking for extra help."

"Don't be stupid, Lysteinn," Gawain said. "That might work for the men, but there are women, children, and elderly out there. What about them?"

"House Mashid manages a few temples," Vector offered. "I can ask if there's room for them there. The temples can offer shelter for whoever worships the Gods of De Marl, so if they're willing to convert to the faith..."

"Yes, I'd imagine temples will welcome the young, old, and women," Lys said. "Hm... So yes, that just leaves food. I suppose women can also work the fields. We can try to see how that works."

"Ah! Thank you!"

Thanks to Lys and Vector, the refugees are going to be let into De Marl! That's great! Even the children who helped me gather herbs will find shelter in the temple. Though the idea of them having to convert to another faith didn't sit that well with me...

But still, it was better than camping outside, where monsters might attack at any time.

"Isn't that great, Tina?" Nakona asked me.

"Yes! I'll go make some fertilizer right now!"

"Yeah, but shouldn't you change out of these clothes first?"

"O-Oh, yeah."

I'd forgotten I was in my formal white dress.



THE day after I met Elysis, we packed our things for the trip back home, picked up our horses from the stable, and began the ride home.

Finally, we'll be going home! It was a relief. *But...going back home, huh?* It wasn't that long ago that I wanted to study so I could

live on my own. But by this point, living with Dad and Nakona felt like a given. And the Rofola Lodge was home. They were my family.

It was an odd feeling but not an unpleasant one.

The young captain of the Azure Knights, Sir Gildias, came to see us off.

“See you,” Dad said.

“Yes! Come visit us whenever... Or, well, I suppose given the state of things, maybe that’s not the right thing to say.” Gildias smiled sheepishly. “But I’ll come see you once everything settles down.”

“You work hard, Gildias. But not too hard, you hear? At least when you don’t have to.”

“I won’t, Vice-Captain!”

Gildias had ice-blue eyes and short, spiky dark-gray hair. He wore a long cloak and impressive armor with blue fringes.

...Are the Azure Knights an idol agency or something?

All the knights that saw us off had fine features and gave off this sparkly aura.

What is this aura of radiant youth...?!

“Young miss, can I write you letters?” Gawain asked Nakona.

“Me too!” Vector chimed in.

“Huh?” Nakona uttered, confused. “Um, sure? But I don’t like writing letters, so it might take me forever to write back to you.”

“I’m fine with that!” the two knights said as one.

“I’ll be writing you a love letter, then,” Lysteinn said.

“Lysteinn!” Gawain and Vector barked at him.

“Ahaha! Oh, Lys, you and your jokes,” Nakona said, waving her hand dismissively.

N-Nakona!

How many times have I seen this conversation already?! Why isn’t there any progress in this whole affair?! Is this what it’s like to watch a reverse harem forming in real life?!

Vector was the only one of the Crimson Knights to see us off, and he definitely did it to see Nakona... I kind of felt bad for how smoothly she ignored him.

“Going home already?” a voice called out to us.

It was Lico!

“L-Lico! H-Hey!” Dad sputtered, clearly flustered.

Did she come here to say goodbye to Dad? Doesn’t look like it...

She was clad in full armor and had a large, bulky contraption

on her arm. Apparently, this was her new Air Gun. Lys's Air Gun looked different, too, upon closer inspection.

"Mm?" Dad furrowed his brow. "What, are you going on a sortie?"

"Yeah, we got a request for aid from Lost Regalia. Lys, you stay in De Marl and help keep it safe."

"I don't want to..." he grumbled.

Lost Regalia? Regalia is like, the authority of the king, right?

Lys looked displeased with having to stay in De Marl. Apparently, the appeal for aid was urgent. What looked like a group of Lico's subordinates approached us on horseback. It was a mixed unit of Ebony and Azure Knights.

"Just Azure and Ebony Knights?" Dad asked. "Why aren't there any Crimson Knights coming with you?"

I was wondering about that too. I wasn't sure she would tell us, though. I had the feeling it might be the kind of confidential information she couldn't share with civilians like us.

"Well, Dir's cremation just ended... The Crimson Knights are still escorting the people who're coming back from the temple. Then there's the monster appearances. We can't leave the Ivory Knights to watch over the outer walls alone. They don't have the combat experience for it."

"Captain Licorice, wait!" Vector called out. "Let me escort you as a representative of the Crimson Knights! At least one of us must come to help defend Lost Regalia! The Crimson Knights' dignity demands it!"

Lico looked at him, her face void of expression. One Azure Knight stepped forward from behind her.

"I'm sorry, but the orders are that all Crimson Knights are to stay behind and defend De Marl. Bear with it, Vector...you *do* know that this all started because your captain got himself on bad terms with House Avide, yes?"

"Ngh..." Vector gritted his teeth.

"I *told* Father not to let that influence things, though..." Lico said, a hint of bitterness to her voice. "Lys, you understand, yes? I'm counting on you."

"Roger that, Lico." Lys nodded. "Still, I think your father would calm down faster if you'd talk to him instead."

"All he'd do is chew me out..." Lico muttered.

"L-Lico..." Dad said, astonished.

I didn't understand what was going on. Lico looked so depressed all of a sudden... Was it family problems? It sounded like Lico's father was involved, but I couldn't infer anything more than that.

I looked at Nakona questioningly, but she looked dejected, too.

"Ah, you know how Lico's father is the former captain of the Crimson Knights?" she asked me.

"Y-Yeah."

"Well, the current captain gained his position by marrying Lico and inheriting it from her father. But now they're divorced, right?"

"...R-Right."

The current captain is Rondered, if I recall. The man who seduced Nakona's mom...

Wait, so Lico's father gave his position away to his son-in-law? And he still divorced her? And remarried another knight order's vice-captain's wife?

"So, yeah, Lico's Dad lost his temper."

"I can see why..."

Knights were supposed to live according to some chivalric code, so having a knight he trusted cheat on his daughter, then abandon her to marry who he cheated on her with... Yeah, he'd get mad. He'd be fuming! It was actually really easy to understand.

"Remember what the Ivory Knights that escorted us yesterday said?" Nakona asked. "There's a feud between the Crimson and Azure Knights. Apparently, all the Crimson Knights were pulled back from the front lines and charged with defending De Marl. And that's because Lico's father is pressuring the army into doing it. So the Crimson Knights are lashing out at the Azure Knights out of frustration, and that's why fights are breaking out between them."

"But isn't being off the front lines a good thing?" I asked, confused.

"Not at all," Gawain chimed in, suddenly. "From a knight's perspective, they're being denied a chance to prove their valor."

Oh, so it's like that...

To that end, Vector clenched his fist and hung his head. I could understand the frustration of training hard, only to be denied the chance of proving yourself. The thought of all the medicine I made never being put to use would depress me, too. I could understand how Lico's father felt, but it was a shame that the knights at the bottom of the pyramid had to be hurt because of a family spat...

And the Crimson Knights used to be his direct subordinates! And Lico mentioned being chewed out...

L-Lico, I feel for you...!

"I'd imagine the Crimson Knights will return to the front lines once Captain Rondered leaves," one of the senior Azure Knights said, tapping Vector sympathetically on the shoulder. "You just need to wait a while longer."

"I hope so..." Vector muttered.

Vector got along just fine with the Azure Knights. Or rather...

"Is Ronde really that up against the wall?" Dad asked.

"Pretty much. Dir tried to mediate between them at first, but as soon as he retired because of his illness, everything went south..."

"...He always had a knack for shouldering trouble that had nothing to do with him..." Dad shook his head sadly.

"*Honestly!* I can't believe how vindictive my own father can be," Lico huffed. "The whole thing doesn't bother me as much anymore, but he keeps going on about how I was 'betrayed.' It's a personal grudge for him now. I can't help but feel terrible for the Crimson Knights... But I'll admit that knowing they're keeping the homefront safe while we're away fighting puts me at ease. I really don't know what to say..."

"That much is true, but the Crimson Knights aren't suited for defensive battles..." Dad said.

"The problem is that they're not getting a chance to build up their commanders on the field," Lico pointed out. "Honestly, I was hoping Vector *could* come along this time..."

"You will get in trouble if they find out," Lico's lieutenant stressed, driving the point home.

She would just get in trouble for defying orders? Not punished? I guess that's the captain of the Ebony Knights for you...

"...Gildias!" Dad said to the captain of the Azure Knights.

"Yes, sir!" Sir Gildias stood at attention.

It was odd to see him react like that, since Dad was just a civilian now. Still, he gazed directly at Dad, his eyes full of trust.

"I think Dir only tried to cover for Ronde because he thought his power as a knight was necessary. And once the war turns fiercer, you'll absolutely need the power of the Crimson Knights. I told you earlier not to overdo it if you don't have to, but that doesn't mean I'm telling you not to be rash when you need to."

“Yes, Vice-Captain!”

Is that advice you should be giving him? Did you just tell a knight captain to be reckless and break the rules?

But all the knights behind him nodded firmly. They all trusted Dad so much... Maybe *that's* why they kept asking him to come back. It's because their trust in him ran that deep. *He's amazing.*

Apparently, in his prime, Dad fought on the front lines as a swordsman. He must have been even more impressive back then.

“We should get going, then,” Lico said. “We’ll escort you part of the way... We’re going in the same direction anyway.”

“S-Sure.”

Dad, of course, lost all that intensity when Lico said those words to him. His eyes darted around, his lips were curled up into an awkward smile, and he was sweating profusely. Saying he was acting strange was an understatement.

Now I've never had a boyfriend, not in this life or my last one, but does being in love really make your IQ plummet that much?



“WE’LL be splitting off here,” Lico said.

“Y-Yeah. You be careful out there,” Dad replied awkwardly.

We parted ways with Lys, Gawain, and Vector in De Marl and then split up from Lico’s group as they headed toward Uru Ki. They’d be galloping the rest of the way there.

“...Dad, I’ve been meaning to ask since it came up, but what’s Lost Regalia?”

That was the place Lico said they were going to protect. De Marl didn’t have a king, though, so what did Lost Regalia mean?

Dad looked in the direction Lico headed toward.

“Well, it’s a place with some ancient ruins. It’s one of the larger ruin sites that’ve been discovered, and multiple countries have signed a treaty to defend them for the sake of research. Watching over the ruins is a group called the Uronon Clan, and De Marl and Uru Ki are obligated to defend it from bandits and monster attacks.

“Edesa Kura is supposed to cooperate when it comes to preserving the ruins, but well, the Uronon Clan doesn’t like having to ask them for help. Apparently, Edesa Kura took some kind of

precious stone or urn from them way back when.”

“That’s stealing!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, it is. But, well, that’s why De Marl’s knights have to send forces to defend it. With the monsters becoming bigger and more rampant, driving them away has become a lot harder. But those ruins are important to everyone and need to be protected,” he finished.

“Ruins, huh?”

Personally, I thought nothing mattered more than people’s lives. But you could never underestimate the importance people placed on a piece of historical heritage, either.

Still, an ancient ruin...

“Hm, that brings me to another question.”

“What’s that?”

“What kind of kingdom existed during those ancient times?”

I recalled Sirius was an archaeologist researching that period, but I didn’t know anything about it. What happened to that kingdom? *Wasn’t that the same era the elves’ Olden King came from? The one whose grimoire picked Shida.*

I wasn’t terribly interested in it, but I figured that it was a piece of general knowledge I’d be better off acquiring before I made an embarrassment of myself. I looked up at Dad, who silently looked away and scratched his head.

Oh.

“You don’t know much about it,” I remarked.

“Ahaha...”

Guess I’ll ask Sirius about it when I get home... I’m sure he’ll be excited to tell me about it.

“Isn’t the Ancient Age, like, the time before the Thousand-Year Blank?” Nakona asked.

“Ah, yeah, that’s right. I’m surprised you know about it,” Dad said, visibly impressed.

“Well, they teach about it in the national school,” she said, shrugging.

“The Thousand-Year Blank?” I repeated.

First I’ve heard of that, too...

But right, Nakona did go to school and study with private tutors before she came to our place. She might know more about this than Dad does.

“Not that I know much about it,” she added.

Oh...

"But apparently, it was this amazing age!" she continued. "But for some reason, it was followed by a thousand years without any recorded history. So no one knows anything about it!"

"O-Oh, I see."

Yeah, that's a no-go. Guess I'll need to ask Sirius about it. It's best to consult an expert, anyway...

"Hm? What's that smell?" I said, sniffing the air.

Something smelled burnt. *Did some adventurers start a campfire? Probably not, since it's still morning.*

"A burned smell... Ah! Nakona!" Dad said.

"Y-Yes?"

"We have to hurry to Uru Ki! This stench! It's a zombie!"

N-No way...! Not only are there monsters running around this world, now it's zombies, too?!

I've never seen a zombie before, but if they're anything like the ones from the zombie movies I saw in my past life...

Ahhh! Ugh, nope, nooooo! Sorry, splatter movies aren't my thing!

"...elp..!"

Huh?

"Ah, Dad, wait! Stop!" I exclaimed.

"Whoa?!"

I yanked on the horse's reins, forcing Judie to stop. Dad looked down at me with surprise as Nakona stopped her own horse.

When I get bigger, I'll definitely need to learn how to ride a horse.

I shook my head and listened carefully. I knew I'd heard something.

"Tina?" Dad asked me.

"What's wrong?" Nakona tilted her head.

"Yeah, I knew it... I hear someone! I hear a child crying for help!"

"What?! Did the refugees trying to enter De Marl get attacked?!"

"Oh no, Dad, what do we do?!"

Dad and Nakona looked more panicked than usual. And of course they were—zombies were immune to all physical attacks. They were somewhat different from monsters, but if the Camilla operating a zombie turned into Kathra, it becomes a monster that's essentially unbeatable. In other words, zombies have to be

destroyed while they're still only zombies and before they transform!

And there's only one way of doing it—with fire!

If a zombie were to be destroyed, the Camilla within it would be left without a vessel, and it would dissipate harmlessly into the air.

Of course, given the polluted condition of the human continent's Air, that's not a good thing, but zombies still have to be defeated.

But even if we knew how to defeat it, that didn't mean we had easy access to fire. Nakona was a physical fighter—she knew how to punch and kick. Dad used a sword and could only swing it with his left arm. And me...I could use some of the magic Shida taught me. But based on my physical constitution, I could only use earth and holy magic.

None of us could produce fire. But did that mean we should ignore that small voice crying for help?

"Let's at least go and see what's going on," Dad concluded grimly.

"Right!"

"Agreed!"

Dad and Nakona would never choose to abandon people to their fate! We turned our horses around and galloped in the direction of the voice. And indeed, as we rode up a hilly road, we found two children and a large...

...Is that a dog? A cat? It kind of looks like a pig...

It had moderately long ears, and its fur was yellow with black stripes. It let out some weird cry that sounded like "Muji, muji." It was trying to assist a child with light-pink hair help the child with violet hair off the ground.

What is that thing? Its fur looks like a tiger's...but it's too round to be feline.

Its legs were stubby, it had hooves for feet, and its ears were too long like a rabbit's. Was it some new species of pig? I'd never seen anything like it in this world.

"There! Dad, it's fifty feet away!"

"We should be able to just make it!"

We could collect those children and leave. And should we save that creature, too...? Nakona pointed ahead, where I saw the overly tall zombie. It shambling forward, dragging its massive arms behind it. The arms were so long that its elbows dragged along the ground.

Its skin was disgusting shades of green and purple, with a few spots of decayed black. It had a tear in the center of its chest, and even from afar, I could see it was filled with countless eyeballs. Its body was slender, as it was really nothing but skin and bone. But despite that, it charged at the children with slow but wide steps.

And then there was its face. Its mouth was lined with teeth, and its face was skull-like. Its eye sockets were empty, with a black, dusky mist flowing out of them incessantly.

Is that the Camilla...?



It was pretty different from my image of a zombie. It felt more like a moving skeleton. But it did have skin and grinding muscles. Most of all, its arms were unnaturally long, and its body was large. It was a giant.

"Isn't it too big...?" Nakona seemed to have the same impression. "Dad, are you sure that's a zombie?"

"Yes, it's big. But a zombie that turned into a humanoid monster is even more terrifying than that. It gets covered in red flesh, full of spikes. You can see black bones between its flesh, and some of them stick out. It seeps this weird, disgusting black mucus and keeps screaming..."

I squeaked. I did *not* want to see that thing! Ever! *I won't be able to go to the bathroom at night at this rate! Why did a human-shaped monster have to be more grotesque than other ones?!*

"Nakona, you put the two kids on your horse. I'll collect that weird creature. Tina, hang on tight!"

"Okay, Dad! Hey! You two over there!" Nakona bellowed, setting off ahead of us. "And you, little creature!"

The zombie raised its face, noticing our approach.

I-It's so gross...! And how far away is that thing?!

If my perspective was right, it was a good fifty feet away from us.

"Ah!" One of the children noticed Nakona and raised their hands for help. "H-Help! My bruvver!"

Based on her voice, the one with light-pink hair was a girl. Both children wore white, filthy clothes that had been stitched together. Their hair was unkempt.

Nakona picked up the girl and the violet-haired boy lying on the ground and got them onto her horse. Dad scooped up the creature and placed it on my lap. It was actually pretty large. And warm! I still didn't have the first clue what kind of creature it was.

"Mujiii..."

"M-Muji?"

Its cry was so weird! And its face was kind of ugly.

Is this a pig? Or a rat? Its incisors are sticking out of its mouth! And its eyes are kind of tiny... Maybe it's a beaver? I mean, it looks like a rodent.

"Oooooooooooooo!" the zombie howled.

"Let's run!"

“Yeah!”

Dad and Nakona turned their horses around and galloped away. Dad’s arms were wrapped around my sides as he held the reins, but if I didn’t lean forward, I’d fall off! And it made my butt hurt!

“Muji muji, mujiii!” the creature squeaked.

“Stop mujiing already!” I chided it.

I get it—really, I do—but just bear with it! I don’t like this shaking either, and my butt hurts, but you don’t hear me complaining!

“Ooooo! Oooooooooooooooooo!” the zombie howled behind us.

“Gaah, it’s running after us!” Nakona said, looking back. “That thing can run?!”

“Zombies often use human bodies, so they have some intelligence to them, but...!”

Is it following us because it’s after these children, then? Is that possible with its limited intelligence?

Maybe its size had something to do with it... *Or rather, if it’s running our way when it’s this large, it’ll catch up to us in no time...!*

“Ah!!!” I exclaimed.

“Ye gods...!” Dad gasped.

Something blotted out the sunlight. A large shadow jumped past us, landing several feet ahead of us as it let out a foul stench...

As Dad exclaimed in shock, Nakona pulled on her horse’s reins, forcing it to stop. The zombie had realized it couldn’t keep up with our horses, so instead it used its overly large body to jump over us, cutting off our forward path!

“Ooo! Oooo...!” it wailed.

Its empty eye sockets leaked black smoke, and I could see a red light at their center. It looked like it was trying to tell us it had locked on to us. Nakona swallowed nervously.

Why is this thing after these kids...?

It started shambling toward us again.

This is bad... Even if we speed up and run, it’ll catch up to us in no time.

Even if we were to take our time and run carefully, it would just follow us to whichever place we went, and we couldn’t saddle another country with this kind of major problem.

De Marl’s knights were probably the only ones strong enough to fight this thing off, but it’d take a whole day to return to De Marl. And our horses wouldn’t be able to ride quickly enough if

they had to carry this many people while running from this thing...

"Tina, can you use your magic?!" Dad asked me in desperation.

"It won't help! I don't *know* any offensive spells! My elements are holy and earth magic!"

"*Kuh!* No choice, then... We'll have to go to Lost Regalia! Lico's men might still be nearby!"

"Y-Yeah, I think that's our only option..." Nakona said.

We'd decided on our destination. We started riding in the opposite direction from Uru Ki, fast enough and in a zigzag pattern to not only keep the zombie from reaching us with its steady pace, but also to avoid its ridiculous leaps. Lico's group was headed for a field slightly southeast of Uru Ki. It was closer to Edesa Kura than Ah Mokiz, one of the southern countries. Honestly, I'd preferred not to go there, but...

"Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo..."

But I couldn't be picky with a zombie hot on our heels!

"Dammit, this thing is persistent!"

"Dad! This child; he's got a fever!" Nakona told us, holding onto the purple-haired boy.

"Tina, do you have antipyretics on you?!"

"Yes, give me a second!"

I fumbled through my pouch.

This is a low-grade tonic, and that's a potion for assorted ailments... There!

"It's a medium-grade one!" I said, passing the bottle over to Nakona as her horse approached ours.

"Thanks! Here, drink this!"

Nakona uncorked the bottle with a flick of her thumb and tipped its contents into the purple-haired boy's mouth. As she did, his long forelocks shifted, and I saw something on his forehead—a stone. A dark-red stone was embedded into his forehead. There were stitches around it, and the skin around it was bloodied and swollen. It looked like it hurt.

Who is this boy...?

"...I-I've got some tonics, too."

"Don't," Dad said grimly. "We need to have that stone in his forehead properly checked. Giving him a tonic ahead of time might make things worse."

"R-Right."

Dad had noticed the stone... My heart ached. My memories of that time had become rather vague, but I did remember my “mother” had a faded red stone in her forehead. So maybe...

No. Given the wound on his forehead, it's likely that child isn't actually someone from my race. And yet, my heart ached. It ached so much...

Why would anyone do that to such a small child...?

“Ngh...”

I felt sick.

“Oooooo...!” the zombie groaned, still following us persistently. Every time we started to get further ahead of it, the zombie would leap into the air to make up the distance.

It lifted its long arms, coiling them into tiny stumps on its large frame, swinging them back and forth in our direction. With a sudden crack, muscle and sinew bulged under its decaying flesh, and a reeking arm stretching to impossible lengths rushed at us from the left sooner than I could process the situation. Since we couldn't speed up, we were unable to avoid it and were already in range of its surprise attack...!

“Jump off!” Dad shouted.

Nakona leaped off her horse, the two children in her arms, while Dad picked me up and jumped to the right.

Judie, Jeff...!

I squeezed my eyes shut as the horses neighed in fear. I didn't want to see it...! They were our travel companions; I didn't want to see them get blown away...!

A gale of wind passed above us as we rolled down the hill. Dad's warmth enveloped me, though, so I didn't feel any pain. I got up and tried to ask Dad if he was all right, but a sob escaped my lips instead.

“Judie...Jeff...” I managed to say.

I knew now wasn't the time for this. Dad placed his palm on my head, and the creature in my arm let out a sad cry of “Muji...”

“...You did it now, you bastard...” Dad whispered in rage.

“*Kuh...*” Nakona wobbled to her feet, her eyes filled with anger at the loss of the horses.

The situation hadn't changed for the better, though. If anything, we were worse off. I never imagined the zombie could be this smart. The zombie had led us into a false sense of safety, when

all this time it could have swept us off our horses. It knew exactly what it was doing...and it was likely enjoying this, too! It looked down at us with narrowed eyelids. It was toying with us!

"Tina... It's all or nothing. Try using your holy magic," Dad said.

"You sure?"

"From what I know, holy magic is the type of magic that's closest to the Stella... It might scare it off. Nakona! You go look for Lico!"

"Huh?" Nakona looked at him, shocked. "Wh-What are you saying, Dad? I can't just leave you two here!"

"I know. Just go and find her; I'll stall for time..."

"Dad, you can't! You're not as strong as you used to be!"

"Still, that's our only chance at survival! You're the fastest out of the three of us! Besides, this thing won't kill us that quickly."

"But...! If that's the case, I'll lead him away instead!"

"Don't bother. Just like monsters, zombies tend to move to where multiple people gather. It won't go after you alone."

"Ugh...!"

He's right... That's the only way.

We're like insects to the zombie. It wants to torture us, like a child tearing the wings off a butterfly. So if it's just Nakona... If I use holy magic to make it flinch, Nakona might be able to get away.

Assuming my holy magic will even work here. But if it doesn't, we'll have to come up with another plan.

I got up, my knees shaking. I'd never tried to fight using magic before, and I never imagined a day might come when I would have to.

"All right, I'll try it!" I said.

"Tina!" Nakona shouted at me, shocked.

"Stop whining, Nakona!" Dad snapped at her. "We're counting on you to run and get help!"

"Nakona, please! I believe in you!" I implored her.

"Ah...!" Nakona grimaced in realization. "You two better stay safe until I come back, you hear?!"

I hope we do, too...

If the zombie were to wave that arm at us again, a single strike would be enough to do us in.

"Tina, you take the kids and move in a little closer while staying near the ground," Dad instructed me.

“Why?”

“Given its physique and prior actions, moving too far away puts him at an advantage with those arms and jumps. So, stay down, and if it moves toward you, dive to where the grass is thickest. The real problem will be if he grabs us...”

“All right.”

Right, the zombie’s body wasn’t much different from ours. Well, its sheer size and long arms were quite different, but since it had to drag its elbows across the ground, it couldn’t grab things that were too close to it. Basically, its longer range meant close range was a weak spot. And while its movements as a whole were slow, if it grabbed us, we’d be pretty much finished. It could always just jump up and crush us with its landing. And it could also just swing its arms and blow us away like a fly swatter...

It could basically kill us at any time! But the zombie simply kept its eyelids narrowed, watching us as if to say “Your move, little bugs.”

It was mocking us. Looking down on us. It pissed me off.

“I’ll try it! Everyone, close your eyes!”

Please, holy magic, work...! Distract him!

I began chanting a blinding spell.

“Light of the Holy Star, answer my prayers! Photon Flash!”

“Gaaaaaah?!” the zombie howled painfully.

“Nakona!” Dad called out to her.

“*Kuh!*”

It was similar to the spell Shida had used on the earthworm. All it did was create a bright light. It was incredibly effective on monsters that lived underground, but it worked on people, too. That was why Shida taught it to me.

The zombie let out another scream and covered its face.

It’s super effective?!

“That worked better than I thought!” Dad exclaimed.

He seemed to be just as surprised as I was!

“I-It’s magic...” the pink-haired girl said in awe.

“Muji, muji!” the creature squealed excitedly in my arms.

“Tina, come on! You too, kids!”

Dad scooped me, the two kids, and the odd creature up under his arms and dived into the tall grass. Even as the light died down, the zombie kept flailing in agony. Nakona rolled under its large legs and sprinted toward Lost Regalia’s ruins to inform Lico about the

situation.

Sh-She's still as fast as ever...

"Do you think we can make it through if we hide?" I asked Dad anxiously.

"Beats me, but I've heard these things can't hear or smell anything. You kids don't move a muscle, you hear!"

"Y-Yes, sir," I said.

"I won't!" The little girl said.

"Muji..."

Can this thing understand what we're saying?

Still, I was worried about the violet-haired boy. He had that stone digging into his forehead, surrounded by stitches. He was probably being pursued by that nasty thing while suffering from his fever. He seemed to have gone unconscious. I envied the fact he didn't have to see this, but certainly not his overall situation...

But still...

"It stinks..." the girl whined, pinching her nose.

"Y-Yeah. I'm getting used to it little by little, but...it does smell really bad..."

"Be quiet," Dad whispered. "If you talk, your breath might make the grass rustle."

"Sorry!" we both whispered to Dad in a hurry.

The stench really was hard to bear. The girl grimaced, her expression agonized. Her hair was long and unkempt, but there wasn't a rock in her forehead. I had questions for her, but that would have to wait until we got away from the zombie.

Still screeching in pain, the zombie slowly removed the arms covering its face. It seemed to be looking around, probably searching for us.

Any way you could give up and go somewhere else?

It likely didn't know which way Nakona went, so she was probably in the clear already.

Just go away! Go somewhere else! Head for greener pastures! I prayed desperately, but the zombie stayed still.

"Aaah, uuuu...!" It let out disgusting moans as the red dots in its empty eyes moved here and there.

J-Just give up already!

At this point, it was a question of which of us would give up first. But just as I accepted the fact we'd have to stay put for a while, the zombie started slowly swinging its long arms again. I

could see the muscles coiling underneath as it made its arms shorter before launching them outward to cleave through plants, trees, rock, and dirt. It moaned in irritation, but the action would force us to move or die if those arms hit us. In essence, it was searching its surroundings for us by destroying them.

This thing really is intelligent...!

It was fumbling around for us. It was looking in the opposite direction for the moment, but we would alert the thing to our presence if we moved now. I turned to look at Dad, who shook his head, silently telling me not to move.

I was scared and anxious, but right now, we had to hide and stall for time. How long would it take for Nakona to reach Lico and her knights, though? I hoped that they were close by. *Their firepower could probably get us out of this...*

“Muji, muji...” the creature squeaked.

“What’s wrong, Mujimuji?” The girl asked the creature.

Th-That’s what you called it? Isn’t that a bit on the nose?

But the next moment...

“Muji, achoo!”

“Ah?!” I gasped.

It sneezed! This little thing just sneezed! The grass probably tickled its nostrils, but why now?!

I felt a chill run down my spine as I saw the zombie freeze in place. I looked at Dad fearfully, who nodded with a sour face.

Y-Yeah, that’s what I thought...

As soon as it turns around, I’ll have to...

“...Light of the Holy Star...”

Just as I began chanting, the zombie turned around to face us. It moved so fast, it made me sharply inhale. *It found us!*

“Light of the Holy Star, answer my prayers! Photon—”

“Oooooooooooooooooo!” the zombie howled as it kicked against the ground.

“Ah!”

It jumped up! I missed my mark...!

“No! Everyone, stay still!” Dad whispered at us.

It hadn’t totally discovered our location quite yet. I did as Dad said, squeezing my eyes shut and covering my head with my arms. A large thud shook the ground, shaking the pit of my stomach.

U-Ugh...it reeks...!

It exuded a burnt stench, but mixed with that was also the

disgusting scent of decay that made me want to throw up.

“Oooo... Ooooo...!”

I could hear it moaning right above us.

Aaah, I-I’m scared! Help! Please, just go away and leave us alone!

“...Tina, I’ll create an opening, so fire off that spell again.”

“Huh, D-Dad?!”

“You guys stay still and don’t move, you hear?” he said as he got to his feet and started running in the opposite direction.

“Dad!”

No, you can’t be bait!

“Take this, you monster! Wolf Fang Slash!”

He drew his sword with his left hand, brandishing it over his head as it shined with mana and heat. From a distance, it looked like a wolf’s fang.

Dad can use techniques with just his left hand...?

“Waaaah...”

The attack hit the zombie head-on, but it didn’t so much as budge. It simply turned around, as though wondering if something had bumped into it. As it did, Dad rolled past its legs, standing behind it as if to tease the creature.

“L-Light of the Holy Star, answer my prayers...!”

I have to do this while Dad keeps it occupied! We have to hide and buy more time...

Like last time, I aimed slightly above its eyes and prepared to cast the spell. But just then...!

“Ah!” I swallowed nervously.

“Haaaaa!”

The zombie jumped into the air! I stopped chanting out of fear that it was leaping toward us. However, the zombie simply jumped in place. *That’s all it did, but...!*

“Whoa!”

“Dad!”

The impact of the zombie’s massive weight striking the ground sent a small earthquake in every direction, making Dad’s body bounce up and then tumble. I could feel the shockwaves here, which made my knees buckle too. This created an opening for the zombie, who snapped out its hand and grabbed Dad.

This must be what total despair feels like. I felt my heart thump painfully in my chest. I couldn’t breathe.

“D-Dad!” I screamed.

“Nng...” He moaned painfully, held within the zombie’s grasp.

Blood... There was blood coming out of Dad’s mouth. It was crushing his insides! But then, it simply discarded him, throwing Dad to the ground without fully crushing him.

This evil thing...really is toying with us...!

“Dad!” I cried as I scrambled to my feet.

“S-Stay! Away!” Dad blurted out the words painfully.

“...!”

Stay away? But, Dad...no...!

The sound of his pained voice made me freeze up.

No... No, no, no!

“Stay away... D-Don’t come here!” Dad breathed out.

“D-Dad...” I whispered.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa....” The zombie’s eyes looked like they were laughing.

It swung its long arm up with us in its range. I had to flee, but where to? I couldn’t just leave Dad and run.

Right, I have to cast my spell...

“Ah, ah...”

But I couldn’t form the words. Was it because Dad got to his feet and held up his sword again?

Dad, don’t! That’s...that’s reckless...!

The zombie swung down its arm.

Dad...!

“Don’t worry, Tina... I won’t budge from here!”

He thrust his blade forward.

No, you can’t! It won’t work; stop!

“No...!”

“I won’t let you touch a hair on my daughter’s head, you rotting bastard!”

For some reason, the word “knight” surfaced in my mind. I could tell there was mana focused in the tip of Dad’s sword. As the blade swung down, the mana surged as if to match its momentum. Raising his voice in a battle-cry, Dad struck his sword against the zombie’s arm. The resulting wind pressure blew against my face.

He...pushed it back?!

“Ooooooooooooooooooooo!” the zombie roared in angry protest.

“Tch...” Having deflected the arm’s swing, Dad fell to his knees.

“Dad! Don’t! Stop it!”

But despite that, Dad still held his sword up and faced off against the zombie. The zombie roared in anger and swung its other arm down with more strength than the last strike! And this time, Dad's stance had been broken. At this rate, Dad was going to...!

No. I don't want this to happen. I haven't repaid Dad for everything yet!



Thud!

The moment before the zombie swung its arm down on Dad, its body folded over. I couldn't tell what just happened as the zombie went flying to the right, rolling across the plains. Where the zombie was just a moment ago now stood a single figure, covered in a cloak.

Th-That guy just...kicked away the zombie?! I didn't just imagine it, right?!

The wind pressure sent his hood fluttering down to his shoulders.

Wait, is that...? Now's not the time! Dad!

I hurried over to Dad, who was kneeling down with his sword stabbed into the earth. He was coughing up blood and bleeding from his stomach and arm..!

"Light of the Holy Star, lend your ear to my prayers and lend me your glow! Photon Healing!"

"N-Not yet..." Dad groaned.

"Dad, be quiet!" I chided him.

"N-No, it's still there..."

He's still going to fight?!

Dad tried to scramble to his feet, but the man in the cloak pushed his uninjured shoulder down.

"No, you stay here and let her heal you. I'll handle that thing."

"You..." Dad squinted up at him.

"You're the man from the other day!" I exclaimed.

Under that hood, I saw familiar black hair and black eyes. It was the young man who'd helped me at the funeral's reception.

Why is he here?!

"Focus on stopping his bleeding. Once you're done, come help me."

"Huh? O-Okay!"

Wait...help him?

At first, he turned a confident smile toward us, but his expression seemed to harden upon seeing my face.

"Ugh...!" Dad's pained moans snapped me out of my thoughts.

"Dad! Lie down!"

"N-No...I have to...stop that thing..."

"Fire Tornado!" The man held up his hand.

With that short incantation, a magic circle appeared in the air,

unleashing black flames that enveloped the zombie.

“Whoa?!” I exclaimed in shock.

Seeing this, Dad let his body relax. He lay down, and I focused the mana into my fingertips. I had to stop the bleeding, if nothing else. I couldn’t see the wound, though. But his clothes were noticeably stained red, and if I moved my hands now to get a tonic, the wound might open again.

Focus. Focus!

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” I heard the zombie screech from afar.

“You’ve gotten pretty fat,” the mysterious young man remarked. “I suppose you’re lucky enough to have not turned into a monster, though... This way, I won’t have to wipe out your very soul. You’ll be able to return to the cycle of transmigration.”

“Aaaaaaaaagh!”

A bright light flashed. I couldn’t tell what was going on...but right now, I had to focus on healing Dad! *That’s what I learned holy magic for! For a time like this!*

I have to do this!

“Dad... Hold on...”

Why is my holy magic so weak...?

Shida said that my level of practice was a factor, but the Air on this continent was also so polluted that it was hard to gather properly. The power of my magic felt like it was getting weaker, which was probably what he meant by that. I tried recovering mana as I cast the spell. I was one of the Spherit Folk, so I should have been extremely efficient at gathering mana...but I still wasn’t gathering enough!

“Ah!” I gasped as the man’s hand suddenly clasped over mine.

I turned to look at him in surprise, finding he was gazing at me with a serious expression in his eyes. He was really close to me...

“Concentrate,” he told me. “Holy magic is of the light element, so if our compatibility is good, we can use synergy to increase its healing power. I’m not particularly good at holy magic, but...we can do it together!”

“O-Okay!”

Shida told me about synergy. When multiple people cast a holy magic spell, they can increase its effectiveness. “You’d be lucky to find other people who can use holy magic, though,” he opined. Apparently, being able to use holy magic was a rare gift.

...In that regard, Dad was probably lucky...

“...Dad!”

I felt warmth fill the spell. This man said he wasn’t good at holy magic, but he was better at it than I was. His mana...felt strangely warm. Dad’s expression, which was contorted in pain until now, softened with relief.

“Th-Thank you. Thank you so much!” I told the young man.

“...No, you were the one who stopped the bleeding...” he said, his voice oddly distant.

“Mm?”

He stared at my face. He really was handsome. But something felt off. He seemed to be looking above my eyes...?

“May I, for a second?”

“Huh?”

He pointed at the pact stone hanging from my neck. It was the light-gray, transparent stone my parents gave me. He was pointing at the pendant containing that stone, and I nodded without thinking about it too much, letting him take it.

For a second, he looked at the pendant seriously, and then, the stone was enveloped with a faint glow. What just happened? The pendant turned a scarlet color...

Wait, it changed? The stone changed?! Huuuuuh?!

“It’s more useful that way than having it sit in that pendant. Especially if you’re out traveling,” he said, placing a diamond-shaped circlet with the pact stone in the middle on my forehead. He had transformed my pendant into a circlet!

H-How did he do that?! Was that magic? Magic can do that?

“Thank you!”

“...So can you tell me what happened here?” he asked.

“Ah, y-yes, erm...”

I wasn’t quite sure what the current situation was, so I looked around. The zombie wasn’t in sight. Did he really defeat it? I couldn’t tell since I hadn’t been watching.

“What about the zombie?” I asked.

“I defeated it. Everything’s fine now...at least I think it is. I can’t feel its presence anymore. If a monster shows up, I’ll sweep it away.”

“Er...”

He sounded really confident.

“Anyway, we’re better off not staying in one place for long.

Even if monsters don't show up, the scent of blood might draw wild animals here. We can talk as we move. We should get this man to a hospital, too. He needs a blood transfusion. Unless you have a blood-increasing potion on you?"

"Ah, s-sorry, I don't. I haven't made anything like that yet."

"Then we'll have to take him to a hospital in a nearby country."

"Erm, but..."

The young man heaved Dad up on his back.

Wh-What do I do? I can trust him, right? I mean, he did help me and...

"Actually, my sister went to fetch some nearby knights for help," I told him.

"Hm, knights? Which way did she go?"

"Toward the ruins of Last Regalia. Um..."

We spent so long running around and hiding I couldn't remember which direction Nakona went. As I was struggling with the answer, the young man pointed to the left, saying, "I think it's that way."

Thinking about Nakona suddenly reminded me that all our stuff had been knocked away with Judie and Jeff.

"Oh, and...!" To stifle my sorrow, I turned around and brought over the two children and the mysterious pig-rabbit creature. The pink-haired girl walked with me while I carried the boy on my back.

"Th-Thank you! You saved us..." The little girl bowed to us.

"No, I didn't do much." I shook my head. "Dad and this nice man did everything. Really, mister, thank you. I don't know how I can ever repay you for this."

I'm gonna have to add you to my list of people I want to repay someday!

"Don't mention it..." The man shook his head hesitantly at first and then held up a finger as he made an offer. "Hm, actually, yes, I think I've got an idea. How about you two hire me?"

"Huh?"

Hire you? Like...pay you to escort us? That's a great idea! But...

"I-I'm sorry. The zombie knocked our horses away and...our wallets with them. We don't have any money on hand..."

"You can pay me later. You're an alchemical apothecary, right?" he asked.

“Y-Yes!”

For a second, I wasn't sure if I should proudly admit to that fact, but I'd already introduced myself as such to him before, and I wasn't planning on giving up on alchemy any time soon.

So, maybe I'm better off just admitting it. While being careful not to draw unnecessary attention to myself!

“You can repay me with goods, then. I would like to have those, *er...* that sweet stuff.”

“Sweet stuff?”

Like, sugar? I cocked my head, puzzled.

He shook his head. What did he mean, then?

“That golden stuff. I think bugs collect it?”

“Honey syrup?”

“Ah, yes, that! You can make it with alchemy, yes? It's quite hard to come by.”

“Now that you mention it, it is...”

I suppose we did collect honey with relative ease. Rofola Lodge was located next to a mountain, and I kept bees, so I could easily procure small amounts of raw honey. *It's a bit bitter, though...*

I haven't collected honey in a while, though, since sugar cane is a much easier sweetener to cultivate. Still, beekeeping was a hard job, and raw honey wasn't fit for human consumption, so alchemy was required to remove the impurities in it. That made it expensive and hard to get.

So, if I make sweets with honey and serve them with the tea Elysis gave me, I could probably make some good money off of it...

“I can probably manage that!” I exclaimed. “But are you sure? Weren't you traveling with friends...?”

“Oh, them? They'll be fine. They can hold their own against monsters.”

“They can...?”

That's...confident. Should he really say something like that?

The monsters on this continent were large and menacing. Of course, I could tell this young man was very strong. What was his race, anyway? He couldn't be normal, considering how he fought off that zombie.

“Erm, mister...did you come from the demi-human continent?” I asked.

“Huh? You're a demi-human?” the girl asked, looking up at him.

That reminded me I needed to ask the kids what happened to them, too. They didn't look like normal refugees...

"...No, I'm an ordinary adventurer who learned magic from someone in Saikorea. I suppose I am unusual, though, since not many adventurers can use magic."

"R-Right!" I nodded. "I was really impressed!"

"You say that, but you used magic first, didn't you?" he said, cracking a sardonic smile.

"Ah, well, in my case, a half-elf and an elf happened to visit my inn, so they taught me..."

"Oh, you have half-elves and elves visit your inn, do you? Is it to the east?"

"Yes. Demi-humans that pass through Fei Lu sometimes come to visit Mount Rofola and Lake Rhio. The mountain itself has some ruins from ancient times..."

"Rofola..." the man said pensively. "Ah, you did mention that last time. The ley lines pass through that area, so the Air must be pretty pure around there."

"Ah, yes... It's better than here, at least."

I'd just experienced the Air's impurities. It was hard to gather the mana, and if this man hadn't come along, I don't think I'd have been able to stop Dad's bleeding. But really, I should have just taken a tonic from my pouch instead of trying to use magic.

Or at least, that's what I thought, but drinking a tonic is difficult when the patient is throwing up blood. And Dad's wounds were pretty severe. The nice man was carrying Dad as we walked toward the ruins, and I had to wonder if that wasn't going to make him worse. Maybe there were safer ways of carrying him, but this was our best option without a horse or carriage.

I'd only healed his surface injuries, but Dad's internals weren't healed yet, and there could still be unseen damage happening as we spoke.

Still, a blood-increasing potion...

I'd seen the recipe before, and now I regretted not trying to make it. I'd assumed hospitals had dedicated alchemical apothecaries make them, and I figured I should leave those kinds of potions to the professionals. So, I never made them, but this time, I realized having them on hand could be the difference between life and death! *I learned something new today!*

"Mm?" The young man noticed my forlorn expression. "Is

something on your mind?”

“I was just thinking about Dad’s injuries. It seemed like his insides were really hurt, too...”

“Oh, I think he’ll be fine. I focused on healing his internal organs.”

“You did?!”

You can do that!? That’s awesome!

Thinking back on it, I suppose if you concentrate on the internal organs, it’s possible to intentionally heal them. I really hadn’t thought things through at the time...

I’d always thought that I could just have people drink a tonic, but there were situations where drinking wasn’t an option. In those situations, I could focus on healing specific parts.

“If you’re worried, why don’t you use Appraisal magic and see for yourself?” he suggested.

“I thought Appraisal was just for checking an object’s quality?!”

“It’s also used in hospitals to examine a patient’s condition. Of course, how much you can see depends on your medical knowledge.”

“R-Really?”

I really thought it was only for checking item quality.

“L-Let me try then...”

Would my Appraisal magic really let me see something like that? I cast the spell and looked at Dad, rather doubtful it would work, but it did tell me his general condition.

“I-It says he’s...moderately injured...?” I muttered.

“*Hmm*, that’s a rough estimate.”

So, a rough estimate was all I could manage...which didn’t tell me if Dad’s condition was favorable or not.

“I checked earlier, but he doesn’t have any internal bleeding, and his external injuries have sealed over. But he lost a lot of blood, so he’ll need a blood transfusion. If we had a carriage, we could carry him more safely, but...”

“S-Sadly, we don’t...”

“Hopefully, the knights have a carriage.”

“I don’t think they did.”

Lico and her knights were on horseback.

What do we do...? I don’t think I have the strength to carry this boy for very long...

I glanced at the purple-haired boy on my back. I was short of breath already, and my legs were starting to hurt.

"Then maybe we should hire a carriage from Lost Regalia. The Uronon Clan should have a village around there."

"Ah, they do?!"

"I'm sure they'll oblige if De Marl's knights make the request. Which reminds me, that boy you're carrying, that girl following us, and that weird creature—who are they?"

"Ah..."

Right, I've been meaning to ask that myself... Mm?

"You don't know what this creature is either?" I asked.

"It's the first time I've seen anything like it. What is this thing?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

That's what I want to know!

I looked at the girl, who averted her gaze uncomfortably and muttered simply, "It's Mujimuji."

Doesn't it have a proper name? I'd kind of like to know what kind of animal we're dealing with here... It is an animal, right? Right?!

"He was in the same place as us. I was traveling with my bruvver and parents when these bad people captured us and threw us into this weird place. And then...Mom and Dad told us to run..." she trailed off.

"Scary people? Like bandits?" I asked.

"What's your name?" the man asked patiently.

"I'm Moné," the girl said. "And my bruvver's name is René."

Moné and René. Were they separated from their parents and captured? They looked to be six or seven years old, and their hair was grown out and wild. Moné kept brushing hers behind her ear, but it wasn't the right length, so it constantly spilled back into her face.

We should probably have their hair cut when we get to the Uronon's village... René's hair is really long too. Were they captured for that long?

"Moné, what happened to René's forehead?" I asked.

"The bad people took him away, and when he came back, he had that thing in his forehead. He's been sick ever since. He couldn't do anything until Mom and Dad came to save us."

"Did the bad people say anything?"

"They said, 'He might sell for more like this...'"

"Slave merchants, from the sound of it..." the young man

concluded.

“Slave merchants?!” I repeated, appalled.

There are slave merchants running around?!

Then I remembered the bandits who picked me up when I was a baby and tried to do the same thing to me. But that black Mythical Beast man saved me.

I wonder what he’s up to now...?

“Edesa Kura *does* allow slavery. Apparently, they absorb the countries around their territory and enslave their people. I’ve heard some of them escaped...”

“That’s so...outdated...and barbaric...” I whispered.

“Agreed.” The man nodded grimly. “They’re definitely getting out of hand. I thought that once the king changed, things might change for the better, but...”

...Edesa Kura is a monarchy?

It wasn’t so much that I didn’t care about Edesa Kura, I just didn’t want to be involved with it. I would’ve been happy living my life without ever learning a thing about that bad country. Or so I thought...but being too ignorant is dangerous. *I should have Dad tell me more about them next time.*

“And? What happened to your parents, Moné?”

“...They died...” she whispered.

“What?!” I turned around in shock to look directly at her.

I couldn’t see her expression under her long bangs, but despite being younger than me, she wasn’t crying. She simply clenched the hems of her ragged clothes tightly.

That’s... That’s awful! Then these kids are...!

“They distracted the bad people to let us escape... I heard them screaming, so I turned around to look when it happened...”

“I-I see,” I said hurriedly. “It’s fine; you don’t have to go on.”

“Yes. I’m sorry...” she said morosely.

“D-Don’t be...”

She still didn’t cry, though. *Such a strong girl...*

I felt the boy on my back—René—growing hotter. And this was after I gave him an antipyretic...maybe it just hadn’t kicked in yet. That was the only one I had on me, so if his fever wouldn’t go down after this, I’d have to make more. But...

Oh, my alchemy pot and rod were in Judie’s bag... Guess I’ll have to hope the Ureron Clan’s village has something I can work with.

“Say, mister, you haven’t told me your name yet...” I said.

"Huh? I haven't? Oh, pardon me, then. The name's Renge."

"Mister Renge..."

"Just Renge will do. I don't like stiff titles."

"Y-You don't? But..."

He'd saved my life and he was older than me. Maybe even older than my mental age. But even as I looked at him, flustered, he just shook his head. *B-But...*

"Th-That doesn't sit well with me..." I protested.

"Do you really like treating people you know like strangers?" he asked.

"N-No, but it's a habit of mine."

"Really? Still, being spoken to formally like that makes my skin crawl..."

"Ugh..."

Don't look so disappointed; you're making me feel guilty!

"Mm?" Renge raised his head suddenly.

I followed his eyes when I heard multiple sets of hooves hitting the ground. *Could it be...?!*

"Tina!" I heard a familiar voice call out.

"Nakona!"

It was Nakona, riding on the same horse as Lico, and the other knights were following them! They were riding toward us at full speed!

Thank goodness... Nakona made it to Lico in time.

Seeing Nakona behind Lico's armored figure filled me with relief.

"Who are you?" Lico asked, looking at Renge through her skull helmet.

Nakona hopped off the horse while Renge kneeled down and gently placed Dad on the ground.

"Just an adventurer who happened to be passing through," he told Lico with a smile.

Meanwhile, Nakona had noticed Dad's pained expression and torn, bloodied clothes. She looked at him with tearful eyes.

"Dad...!"

"Not to worry, he's still alive," Renge assured her. "But he did lose a great deal of blood, so he'll need a blood-increasing potion. Does the Uron Clan's village have a clinic?"

"They do; it shouldn't be a problem," Lico said. "What's your name, adventurer?"

"It's Renge," he told her.

"Hm?" Lico responded with confusion. "Is that the tongue of the ancient kingdom? That's unusual. Where do you hail from?"

"I have no home anymore."

"I see. I apologize for bringing it up, then."

The ancient kingdom's tongue? And...he doesn't have a hometown anymore?

That...kind of sounds like me.

"Anyway, get on. We don't have anything the size of a carriage, but we did take a wagon. What's Marcus's condition...?" Lico asked.

"He needs a blood-increasing potion or a transfusion. We've treated his injuries, but his ribs seem damaged. Normal healing magic can't heal broken bones," Renge answered.

"What?! And you carried him on your back despite that?!"

"I did put the bones back in place using magic, but he's better off lying down. Ah, thank you."

Renge must have been a very good user of magic.

With the help of some of Lico's subordinates, he loaded Dad onto the wagon. *Thank goodness. Now we can transport him more safely.*

Dad...

That was the first time I'd heard about Dad's bones, though! *Did he keep quiet about it to not worry me? Geez...*

"Are you all right, Tina?" Nakona asked me, visibly concerned. "That man..."

"Yeah, he's the one who helped me at the reception. He beat the zombie, too."

"Yeah!" Moné appended enthusiastically. "He made fire and it went wooooooosh!"

Thanks for the explanation, Moné!

I wasn't looking when he fought it off, but he must have burnt it to a crisp with fire! He's amazing!

"Really? Thank you very much, sir! You saved my father and sister," Nakona said to Renge.

"No need for thanks; she hired me," he replied with a smile.

"Huh?"

I felt Nakona turn her eyes on me. She smiled at me so intensely, I had to look away.

I-I mean...

"Tiiiiina? What is he talking about? We lost all our things when Judie and Jeff got blown away. That includes our wallets. We're pretty much broke right now!"

"E-Erm, we agreed I'd pay him later in honey syrup..."

"Honey syrup? Like the honey you collect from Mount Rofola?"

"Yep! I promised I'd make him pastries with that honey syrup. He said that would be his fee."

"H-Huh? Well, I guess honey syrup's pretty expensive... But... you're gonna make pastries out of it? Aren't you supposed to put honey syrup on bread?"

"Y-You can make pastries out of it, yeah. Sweet pastries."

"Really?"

Did you think the only way to eat honey is by rubbing it on bread? I know usually only the rich and nobles eat honey, but did they really establish that as the only way to use it?

If that's the case, if I present new ways of using honey, the Rofola Lodge will make a really pretty penny off it...!

"Let's get going to the Uron Clan's village. If the zombie's defeated, we should hurry and have Marcus looked at," Lico said.

"Yes, ma'am!" the knights answered promptly.

Nakona and I each rode with one of the knights, while Renge and Moné rode the horse towing the wagon. Dad, René, and the Mujimuji creature laid in the wagon. It was a wooden wagon without a roof, but it seemed like a safer option than carrying Dad on someone's back.

After riding for thirty minutes, we finally started to see some residences. Simple, square houses made of stone bricks, lined up in set intervals. They all looked so similar to each other, I had to wonder if these were actually the ruins. They looked like houses people in tribal communities might live in, but surprisingly enough, the people who came out to greet us were dressed just like the people of De Marl.

I expected tribesmen or something, but they look perfectly normal...

The sole exception was that they wore crowns made of leaves on their heads.

What's that, a wreath of laurels? Hm, I guess not. I don't think laurels exist in this world. I think there was a plant similar to them. Muldsalt, right? Hmm. That reminds me of salted clams...not that clams

have much to do with anything right now!

"Excuse us, but some of our people are injured. Can we have a doctor examine them?" Lico asked one of the people who came out to greet us.

"Yes, of course. Right this way."

"Thank you."

Lico left Dad with someone who looked like the village leader. The villagers started pulling the wagon Dad and René were in toward the clinic. Nakona and I got off our horses to follow them.

"...By the way," Lico said, turning to look at Renge. "You said *you* were the one who defeated the zombie?"

"Yes?"

"What kind of zombie was it?"

"Hm..."

Renge glanced in my and Nakona's direction. *Right. We were the ones who got attacked, so we should probably be the ones to explain.*

"It was big..." I explained for him. "Its arms were really long, and it walked while dragging them on the ground. And I think it was really intelligent. It kept predicting what we'd do and was toying with us."

"Y-Yes, that's the one!" one of the villagers who'd joined us cut into my words. "A few like that one have been loitering around the area..."

"A few?!" Nakona and I cried at the same time, going pale alongside the knights who heard.

There weren't just one of those things?!

A giant zombie was unusual in and of itself—and now we found out there were multiple zombies of that size roaming these parts. The knights exchanged confused glances, and Lico's expression was exceptionally grave...or, at least, I guessed it was. I couldn't see what she looked like under the helmet.

"Uren, can you give it a try?" she asked one of the knights.

"...I'm afraid it's hard to gather mana with the state the Air in this area is in. It'll be...difficult," he answered.

"No choice, then. We'll have the Ebony Knights exchange their weapons for flamethrowers. We have to defeat them while they're just zombies! We *can't* let those things turn into monsters."

Lico and her forces were called in to deal with monsters, after all. Were those monsters actually these zombies?

"And we've seen a wolf monster walking around, too. There

was only one, but it was very quick..." the villager mentioned to them.

"We'll have the Azure Knights handle that one," Lico said, then turned to Renge. "You said your name was Renge, right? We'd like your cooperation with exterminating those things. We'll pay for your time."

"...I'm afraid this girl has already hired my services."

"Huh?" I exclaimed, taken aback by him turning to me to decide. "Ah, erm..."

Given Dad's condition, he'd probably have to stay still for a few more days. And if there were zombies like that one swarming the area, I definitely wanted them gone!

"Please help the knights," I told him. "Protect the village, please!"

"Well, if my employer says so, I can't refuse, now can I?" Renge said with a smile.

"Thank you." Lico bowed her head to him. "Everyone, we begin the operation at once!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Renge waved at me, as if to say he was off. Watching him do so with a calm smile...made my heart thump a bit harder. *I mean, he is...handsome. A real cute guy. His facial features are fair, no matter what angle you look at him. His voice is kind...*

He's like the kind of fairytale prince who is meant just for the heroine...

He was strong, kind, showed up whenever you needed him most, and could use magic. Attractive, good-natured...! He was so blessed in every way that I couldn't believe he didn't have a hometown, just like me.

He probably had to work himself to the bone to get by. *So, maybe he isn't really as blessed as I first assumed...*

"Tina?" Nakona spoke to me, confused by my sudden silence.

"Ah, w-we have to go check on Dad! And Moné must be worried René too."

"I-I am," Moné said.

"I hope he can leave the clinic soon..."

"Me too..."

Nakona, Moné, and Mujimuji joined me as I hurried to the clinic. And since I was hurrying...

"Haa, haa, haa, haa..." I was soon gasping for air.

“Already?!” Nakona chided me. “Tina, you run out of breath so quickly.”

“N-N-Not m-my f-fault... *Haa, aaah...*” I panted.

Did someone curse me to be permanently out of shape or something?! I mean, I know I gave up jogging awfully fast, but still...!

“*Haa, aah...* Huh?” I suddenly stopped and looked up.

“What’s wrong, Tina?” Nakona stopped next to me.

“The sky...”

I looked up at the heavens. This world had two suns and two moons that moved in alternating patterns. I wasn’t sure about the physics mumbo-jumbo behind it, but apparently, as one celestial body approached our world, another moved away, and they repeated that cycle.

And that was fine and all, but for some reason, now, there was a black dot between the currently visible sun and moon. I strained my eyes, gazing at it while Nakona placed a hand over her forehead to block out the sunlight.

“You’re right. What is that? That wasn’t there before.”

“I-It gives me the willies...” I said.

“Did the sky burp or something?” Moné asked.

B-Burped? The sky? What gave you that idea, Moné?



THREE days had passed since we reached the Uronon Clan’s village. Dad was finally well enough to stand up and walk, and his stomach and chest were held in place with something like a cast, which made him say “Maybe I can ride a horse now!” To that end, we decided to let him try riding for a short distance first.

For the record, I’m against this...

We left the clinic, and Dad gallantly got on one of the horses Lico’s squad brought with them. It didn’t take long before—

“Ow, ow, ouch!”

“G-Get him off!”

“Vice-Captain!”

“D-Daaaad!”

...See? That’s what I thought would happen...

“I did think it’s too soon for him to ride a horse,” Renge said.
“It shakes too much.”

"I thought so too," I wholeheartedly agreed. "Still, this village doesn't have any large carriages..."

"We should continue to heal him with magic and prepare some blood-increasing potions before we try this again," Renge recommended. "We haven't defeated all the zombies in the area yet, after all..."

"There's still *more* of those hanging around...?" I asked, sighing.

I hope we can go home soon...

Life in the Uron Clan's village was pretty rustic, and they didn't use any seasoning in their cooking. And so, their food was, well...it was honestly so yucky, it wore down my spirit in a different sense.

There's a small forest on the outskirts of the village, so maybe I should go out looking for ingredients I can refine into some kinda seasoning.

The food Dad was served was super healthy-looking...and I didn't really mean that as a compliment. But maybe that was exactly what he needed. The same couldn't be said for Nakona and me, and each meal really strained our nerves.

"What are your plans for the day, Tinaris?" Renge asked me.

"I figured I might go into the forest and gather ingredients for some seasonings..."

"I...see."

Having traveled the world, Renge was aware of how problematic the food quality was here. He stood beside me, looking down at me with a faint smile that said it all. Honestly, Lico and the knights were pretty worn down by the food options too. Having to eat something so tasteless after a long day of work didn't do much to refresh their spirits...

"Are you going to help Lico and the knights today, too? How many more monsters do you have to slay?"

"About twelve. There are a lot of them, and they're all unusually big. That does make them easier to find, though. They stand out."

"I'm surprised this village is safe..." I said.

"The ruins have a monster-repelling barrier that still functions. Soon enough, people are going to have trouble living in places that *don't* have them..."

"Because the monsters' numbers are rising?"

“Yes, that’s right,” he said and then whispered to himself, “Will mankind fall into ruin or will this world be consumed by the monsters first...?”

“What was that?”

“Nothing...”

What did he just say?

The muffler covered his mouth, so I couldn’t hear his voice clearly. Why was he wearing a muffler anyway? His face was so handsome, hiding it was a waste.

Maybe he’s cold?

And it was a very long muffler. When his hood was down, the rest of the muffler hung from his shoulders down to his feet. How long was it? About eight feet if he unwrapped it? Renge was a pretty tall guy too.

Why does he need such a long muffler? Hmph, I’ll never understand how cute guys think.

“Oh.”

“Mister, miss!”

A voice called out to us, which made Renge turn around with a smile that reached his eyes.

Oh no. A cute guy’s smiling face. It’s too powerful!

He directed the smile toward Moné, who was hurrying toward us with a pitter-patter of her little feet. Her bangs had been cut, and her hair tied into a ponytail on the left side of her head. Following her were Mujimuji and René, who also had had his hair cut.

He’d received medical attention, and once his fever went down, they removed the stone from his forehead and stitched it back up. His condition improved dramatically after that. Much like Dad, he still required more checkups, and he’d need to drink tonics regularly for a while.

“Hey, stop running! You’ll trip and fall on your face, ugly!” René called out to his sister.

“I’m not ugly! We have the same face, so if *I’m* ugly, so are you!”

“You only call women ugly! Ugly, ugly!”

“Grrrrr!”

The two of us stared at the siblings in stupefied silence. Moné was right, though. They were twins, so any complaints about her looks could be directed back at René.

With their bangs cut, it was clear how similar their faces were.

Of course, as they got older and entered puberty, their facial features would probably change, but they were almost identical right now.

Except for the scar on René's forehead. That was probably going to stay. The stone had dug really deep into his forehead. I felt bad for him.

"What's your old man doing?" René asked, looking at me.

"We were checking if he was good enough to ride a horse yet. Looks like it's too soon, though."

"I see... Are you gonna leave when he can ride again?"

"Y-Yeah..."

The twins exchanged glances, with Mujimuji looking up at them. These two kids...their parents had been killed. René didn't remember much of the ordeal, since he was delirious from the fever, but he did recall his parents' tragic screams.

Such a little boy and girl had to experience something that awful...

"...Wait a second, all right?"

"Hm?"

I hurried over to Dad, who got off the horse, rubbing his abdomen painfully. He still looked pretty pale...but when I approached him, he simply smiled and asked me what was wrong.

I know I'm not in any position to ask for this, but...

"Dad, about René and Moné..."

"Yeah. I heard their parents passed away..."

"Yes. So, what are we going to do with them?"

"Good question..."

Could we take them with us to the Rofola Lodge? That question was on the tip of my tongue, but I was afraid of putting it into words. I was still a child myself, and this wasn't as simple as adopting a pet.

Nakona came back from returning the horse to the knights and stood beside us.

"Are you talking about Renémoné?" she asked, putting their names together.

"Y-Yeah..."

Nakona... Can you not call them that? It sounds like anemone to me...

Maybe it worked, though? They were twins, after all...

Shoot, I might start using it without even meaning to...

"Why don't we adopt them?" Nakona suggested.

Just like that?!

“H-Huh, b-but...” I stammered.

“I mean, why not?” she continued, shrugging. “I don’t think the orphanage in De Marl would accept them.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“The times being what they are...” Dad said gravely. “No one wants more mouths to feed.”

“Ah!”

I remembered the line leading up to De Marl’s entrance and the refugees camping outside. De Marl was too occupied with keeping its own people safe; it didn’t have the capacity to accept more people. But rejecting orphans? *That’s awful...*

“If they were a little older, they could volunteer as knight apprentices, and that’d guarantee them life necessities. But when they’re this young...?” Dad sighed.

“So...yeah, let’s just adopt them!” Nakona repeated the idea again.

“N-Nakona, you can’t be that nonchalant about this...” I muttered.

“Wellll...maybe that’s not such a bad idea,” Dad said, rubbing his chin.

“D-Dad?!” I looked at him, incredulous.

That’s exactly what I wanted to ask! C-C-C-Can we, though?!

“Are you against it, Tina?” Dad asked.

“Of course not! I totally want to!”

“Right. Then I guess that’s decided. Of course, it’s up to them to decide if they want to come with us...let’s see.”

Dad approached Renémoné with a bit of a limp. Renge was squatting in front of the children, speaking to them with a smile at their level. As Dad called out to them, Renge rose to his feet, and Renémoné looked up at him curiously.

“But Tina, didn’t you approach Dad to ask him if we can adopt the twins?” Nakona whispered at me.

“Y-You knew?”

“Of course I did. You’re pretty transparent, Tina.”

“U-Ugh.” I dropped my head.

The three beefcake knights wouldn’t want to hear you say that. Why can’t you be this observant when it comes to those three?! It’s about time you picked one of them to...get along with!

True, we don’t see them that often, but they did write her letters

every month! They're so devoted, seeing them work so hard is wearing down my spirit!

"Let's go talk to them, too," Nakona said.

"Yeah."

Upon hearing Dad's proposal, Renémoné's faces lit up for a moment. But it really was for only a moment. They exchanged glances, and then René looked up at Dad again.

"We want to go look for Mom and Dad, so...no, thank you."

"...I think you should let De Marl's knights handle that."

"You'll just run into the same peril," Renge said. "Do you want to put your sister in danger?"

"I'll...er, I'll go alone!" René said bravely.

"No, I'm coming with you!" Moné insisted.

"No, *you* go with this man! I'll find Mom and Dad..."

"No!"

"Mujii..." the small critter let out a concerned cry.

Th-They're arguing...

Renge was backing up Dad, but René was insistent on looking for his parents. I understood how he felt, but it was reckless. Moné looked about ready to burst into tears, and Mujimuji was loitering at their feet. *How can we get René to understand?*

"Listen, boy! What do you need to focus on right now? Is it searching for your parents or looking after your sister?" Dad asked.

"You can let other people look for your parents," Renge added. "But the only way you can really keep your sister safe is by staying with her. She's your only family...and you're the only one who can keep her safe. Right?"

René hung his head.

"You have to be there for each other," Dad stressed, patting him on the head.

René shook his head, holding back the tears. Moné clung to his shoulder, to which he simply muttered, "Let go, ugly. You're heavy." Despite his words, though, he wrapped an arm around her.

I realized just how fortunate I had been. Had those bandits who plucked me from the river that day raised me, I'd have grown up in an environment where I could have died every day. If it weren't for that nice, Mythical Beast, I would have—

Wait.

I looked up at Renge.

"Mm?" He looked back at me.

Half of his face was hidden behind the muffler, but...

He looks like him. But, wait, that can't be. It's been twelve years. I mean, my memories are pretty fuzzy.

I *did* feel like I'd met him before, though. Black hair. Black eyes. Those two matched, but if I compared him to the nice Mythical Beast man, the most I could say was that they...felt similar? Besides, how would I even check? *I can't just ask him if he's a Mythical Beast. I can imagine the look he'd give me!*

Still...I wanted to repay my debt to the Mythical Beast someday.

"Well, that's decided!" Dad declared loudly.

Huh?! You smoothed out all the details while I was taking a stroll down memory lane?!

"Once we rest a little more, the five of us and *this* little one will go back to the Rofola Lodge! And while we're resting, I'll ask Lico and her knights to look for your parents while they take care of the zombies. Renge, could you help out?"

"I'm under Tinaris's employ ..." he started.

"Y-Yes, please help!" I chimed in.

"...but I assumed she'd ask me to help, yes."

Y-You too, Renge?! Am I really this transparent? I don't get it!

"I'll keep you all safe on the way back to Rofola Lodge; don't worry. I'll be expecting that payment, though!" he said, grinning broadly behind his muffler.

"Y-You've got it! I'll make it really tasty for you!" I said enthusiastically.

It felt like whenever he smiled, sparkles filled the air around him. *He must have a real sweet tooth...*

"H-Hmm, you're following us to Rofola?" Dad asked, eyeing him dubiously.

"Oh? You don't want me to?"

"N-No...that's not what I meant..."

Dad looked like he wasn't happy to have Renge join us. What, was he worried Nakona might develop a crush on him? Nakona was seventeen years old, so she was definitely at the right age to have a crush or two, wasn't she? Plus, Dad had his own love life to straighten out before he worried about other people!

"Miss!" Moné looked up at me, beaming.

"Oh, right!" I squatted down and greeted Renémoné. "Welcome to the family, Moné, René, Mujimuji!"

“Thanks!” Moné said happily.

“*Hmph*,” René scoffed at me.

“Muji!” Muji squeaked adorably.

Looks like the Rofola Lodge’s staff just grew a little bigger!

♣My Daughter is...

WHEN I came to, I found myself looking up at a stone ceiling. I looked around, and my gaze fell on a window with nothing inlaid in it. The sun shone through that opening. The air was clean but not as clean as the Rofola Lodge's.

It was a square room with a sandy dirt floor. It was equipped with a table and chair, and on the table were simple medical tools. I looked at my good arm and found a transfusion needle connected to a flask of blood-increasing potion.

I guess I fainted and now I'm here.

My stomach was covered in bandages and I was resting on a bed. I tried to get up, but the moment I put any force on my stomach, my body screamed in agonized protest. I sank back into the covers.

So, I survived.

It was the first time I'd seen a zombie that large. Zombies usually had the intelligence of a newborn baby. They were created when the primal evil, Camilla, collected and accumulated within an unburned dead body. In other words, its size should match the size of the original body it inhabited.

But the zombie I'd fought was larger than any human I'd ever seen. The monsters were growing huge in recent years, and now the zombies...something was off. Which reminded me, right before I went unconscious, I thought I saw a familiar young man...

"T-Tina!" I called out and tried to sit up, only for my injuries to once again punish my impulsiveness with pain. "O-Ow...!"

"She's fine."

"Huh!?"

I somehow managed to tilt my body slightly higher without hurting too much and discovered a large, black creature sitting at the door.

It talked, I thought to myself, my eyes wide with shock.

"A M-Mythical Beast...?!" I gasped.

"Correct," the creature said, rising from its sitting position.

“Huh!?”

It had black fur and three tails that each moved on their own.



A black mist seemed to trail after it as it walked, and from within that mist appeared the figure of a young man. He had black hair and eyes, and half of his face was covered with a muffler.

Isn't that the adventurer who talked to Tina when we came to De Marl...?

"Allow me to answer what you once asked me. My name is Renge. I came to this continent on behalf of the King of Myths, Curalius."

"The King of Myths...?"

"Yes. The ruler of the Mythical continent, Curirea. I've come on his behalf..."

"B-But you look human..."

"Masking one's form and age doesn't take much effort for us."

The pain in my abdomen was the last thing on my mind now. A Mythical—a creature of legend was speaking to me. My hand flew to my mouth, I started sweating profusely, and my stomach churned nervously. But I had to believe what I was seeing. Or maybe this was a delusion brought on by the pain?

I rubbed my stomach and it ached in response. This wasn't a dream.

Renge, the Mythical Beast. He wore a long mantle with a deep hood, and a muffler covered his mouth. He pulled back his hood and removed the muffler. He was a very handsome man. So much so, actually, that he couldn't be human.

"Your name was...Marcus, yes?"

"H-Huh? Y-Yeah."

"Aren't you going to ask why I revealed my identity to you?"

"...Y-You'd tell me if I asked?"

"I'm here to speak to you about your youngest daughter...the girl I left in your care."

"...The girl you... Ah...!"

Allow me to answer what you once asked me.

A large, black animal. Three tails. The daughter he left in my care. Him knowing my name.

I remembered. When Tina was just a baby, a Mythical Beast led me to her. The black animal that guided me to Tina...!

"Th-That was you?!"

"I didn't realize it until I saw the pendant she was wearing... humans really do grow quite fast. One's age is such a difficult

concept for us. I was surprised.”

At the time, I had asked the Mythical for its name and gave it mine to make it less cautious of me. So, he was talking about what happened back then...

Talk about being sincere...

“Marcus, let me cut to the chase... I can’t decide this on my own.”

“What can’t you decide?”

“I want to take Tinaris back with me to the Mythical continent. I want her to meet our king and inherit the power of the primal star, Stella. She’s the only one who can...there’s no one else who *can* anymore, except for her.”

“Wh-What? ...You want to take Tina to the Mythical continent? No, wait, wait...! I’m not following you here. What are you talking about?”

The power of the Stella? The power they say Saint Akari-Berz once wielded? The power to eradicate all illness and purify monsters? Renge hung his head, his eyes full of sadness. What kind of circumstances are at play here?

“E-Explain yourself.”

“...It won’t be long before this world falls to ruin.”

“Excuse me?”

The world...falls to ruin? Those words rolled around inside my head. I liked it when people were straight and to the point, but this was a little *too* sudden. I needed him to explain things a bit better than that! *What does he mean by “before the world falls to ruin?”*

“I’m not joking. The Predatory Star...Sugula has returned to our skies.”

“S-Sugula?”

“It’s a gigantic monster that devours entire stars, perhaps even entire solar systems. It’s still small now, but within five years, it will grow large enough to consume this entire planet in the blink of an eye. You should look out at the sky once you get better.”

“A monster that devours stars...?!” I uttered in disbelief.

“Camilla begins to increase on the surface of a world, and the Predatory Star is born in its skies. The increasing number and size of the monsters is only an omen for its birth. Two millennia ago, the Sugula threatened to consume this world... You know of the Thousand-Year Blank, yes? That’s the result of the people back then employing the wrong method to defeat the Sugula. The Primal

Punishment, Kaguya—Remnants of the Sugula—rained from the heavens and destroyed all civilization.”

I was struck silent.

“The mankind might have forgotten about it. And so too did the demi-humans...even the elves. Two thousand years is too much, even for their long lifespans.”

My mouth hung open. I didn’t know much about history, but Nakona had told me about the Thousand-Year Blank. This situation was simply too large—too vast to feel real. I forced myself to blink and covered my open mouth with one of my hands. I then rubbed my face and put my hand down.

“...S-So *that’s* why you need the Stella? But why Tina? They say the power of the Stella was lost, but even if you do have it, how do you fight that thing? How is someone supposed to fight something hovering in the sky?”

“...The Stella isn’t completely lost. On her deathbed, she left the power of the Stella with the King of Myths, Curalius.”

“She... You mean Saint Akari-Berz?”

“Huh? A-Ah, yes, right, that’s what the humans call her... But yes, her.”

“*Hm?*”

That was oddly unclear. Still, I waited for him to continue. We were getting to the important part.

“...But us Mythical Beasts can’t wield the power of the Stella. Air, in its dislike of humans, granted that power to *her*. Apparently, Air told her to ‘prove she can avert destruction with that power.’”

“Air? You mean, the creator god?”

“Yes. It doesn’t much like most living things, with the exception of us Mythical Beasts. Granting the Stella to a human was truly a unique show of hope on its behalf. And she went on to give Lord Curalius the power of the Stella, and then left yet another possibility. And those were the Spherit Folk.”

“Spherit Folk? Possibility?”

“It was the product of coincidence, and yet, it was more than just a possibility. It was like a thread meant to tether hope. The Spherit Folk, who hold a Spherit Stone within their forehead... might be able to contain the Stella within their body and wield its powers. Because they are the bond tying humans and demi-humans together.”

“Huh...?!”

The bond tying humans and demi-humans together. The power of hope granted to mankind. The Stella.

No, but...

"B-But wait, if it's a power granted to us humans, it doesn't have to be Tina who..."

"A normal human can't withstand the power of the Stella. It's a type of divine power... No one can wield it but those directly chosen by Air. But the Spherit Folk have their Spherit Stones. Spherit Stones are Spherits made into solid matter. Just as they can house mana from the Air, they can also contain the Stella without it overwriting their personality."

"It overwrites their personality?!" I exclaimed.

"A power that's too strong can pollute the mind. That's why the only ones who can contain and use the Stella are the Spherit Folk. The demi-humans can't wield it properly, and not even the elves can use it safely."

"...Can't we just use Spherit Stones to contain it?" I asked.

"The Stella's sheer mass is different from ordinary Air. Even a practiced sorcerer would have their minds polluted before they could get used to it... Normally, a Spherit Folk who has awakened the power of the Stone of Daybreak would be most suited to wield it, but any Spherit Folk with a Spherit Stone in their body should be able to get used to wielding the Stella."

It was strange. Something didn't mesh right. He was talking like Tina was a Spherit Folk. A bad feeling overcame me as I gripped the sheets with sweaty palms. I had to confirm it.

"It sounds like you're implying that Tina is a Spherit Folk..."

"Hm?"

"B-But she's just a normal human, right? And if she is, she can't do this either. Listen, that girl, she's—"

"...When I met her after I defeated the zombie, she had a Spherit Stone on her forehead."

I fell silent.

"So, she really *was* newly awakened..." Renge pensively placed a finger to his chin.

Newly awakened? What does that mean?

"L-Let me check to be sure. We can talk about the rest after that..." I said.

"Well, I don't mind that, of course. But we don't have much time. The Sugula is already in the sky. The only way of erasing it is

by using the Stella to erase the Kathra off the surface of this world, little by little. If we use the wrong method to destroy it again, the Kaguya will once again bear down upon us. And now that the land of the Spherit Folk lies in ruins, I thought we had no choice but to wait for the end to claim us.”

I hung my head.

“She’s our only hope. I left in search of humans or demi-humans capable of possibly wielding the Stella, but... I’d rather have *her* inherit the power than risk driving people mad. Of course, this would mean she’d...”

Renge seemed to swallow the words. And I thought I knew why he did. He gritted his teeth and bit his lips. He wasn’t so much worrying for Tina as he was lamenting his own incompetence. Even a Mythical Beast, which was so much more powerful than any human, was reduced to such a state...

The Sugula, a monster larger than any planet, was coming. Why was such a creature ever born?

“There’s something else I want to ask you. Why is this Sugula thing being born? You said the monsters growing stronger was just an omen. So that’s not the cause. There’s some other reason.”

“...The last time the Sugula was born, it happened because the Dwarf inside the Bottle created it while trying to form a body for itself. But I don’t know why it’s happening now. The Dwarf inside the Bottle was burned away two millennia ago...”

“The Dwarf inside the Bottle?”

“A new species Uncle Keria produced by accident...or something of the sort. It had been mixed with human blood, allowing it to speak the tongue of man and gain intelligence. It was nothing but black mass gathered at the bottom of the bottle, but it didn’t look like Kathra. It was like it was made out of Kaguya. I suppose you could call it a Kaguya with a will of its own.”

“...There was something *that* dangerous out there? Is it responsible for what’s happening this time?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking into it now. I went to De Marl, since it’s a human country that’s willing to cooperate with us, but...the situation seems delicate there.”

“Ugh...”

So *that’s* why he was in De Marl. And he was right; De Marl was a large country. The bigger a country becomes, the more skeletons it has in its proverbial closet. The upper echelons of De

Marl were rotten; there was no mistaking that. That hadn't changed since I'd served that country. But at the time, Dir was there to help keep things in check. *So, there's still...*

"You should speak to the knights Gildias and Licorice. I trust those two. They should help you," I advised.

"Licorice? That knight in the black armor? She's in this village right now. Ask her for help, you say? I suppose she does seem like a devoted person."

"Y-Yeah."

That was the end of the conversation, it seemed. This pretty boy talking to Lico...just the thought of it made my stomach churn.

Still, Lico doesn't pick men based on looks, right...?

At least, I didn't want to *think* she did.

"I'm a bit surprised, though," he added.

"About?"

"I didn't think a human would believe anything we say... Especially when I come bearing such bad news."

"...Let me level with you. I'm still not sure how much I can believe you."

He cocked his head quizzically while I scratched mine awkwardly. It was all so absurd and overblown, and it felt like the only way I could swallow this story was if I assumed it was all fake.

But still, a member of an elusive, illusory species came all the way to the human continent. And he introduced himself as the representative of the King of Myths. He wouldn't do so much just to lie or play some kind of elaborate prank on me.

And most importantly, it was him that led me to Tina on that fateful day. I saw his beast form with my own two eyes.

"You're right—I can't believe it." I shook my head.

"I thought as much."

"...But I don't think you'd lie to me."

"Me?"

"That beast form from earlier... I can believe you're a Mythical. I mean, you are, right?"

"...Only half. One of my parents was human."

I furrowed my brows in disbelief. *A mixed child between a human and a Mythical?*

"Th-That's something that can happen?" I asked.

"In the distant past, when the sea didn't separate our continents, such things happened. It wasn't just me. *Mm*, well...it's

said that the ancestors of those who now unite the demi-humans were born of the mingling between man and Mythical Beast. My case had its own unique circumstances, though. That's why I can assume a human form more easily than others of my kind."

"...It feels like my mind's close to bursting from all this information..." I groaned.

"Right, you're still recovering from your injuries. My apologies for taking up so much of your time."

"N-No, it's fine..."

Even as I spoke reservedly, I patted my abdomen, and sharp pain jolted through my nerves. As I took a breath and exhaled, it felt as if part of my warmth escaped my body. I accepted Renge's apology and lay down.

"Can I ask you one more thing? Why did you tell me all of this?"

That was another thing I didn't understand. I'd met him twelve years ago, and I was Tina's foster father...but still. He could have simply shared all this with Tina and taken her along without my permission.

She was a smart girl. If what Renge said was true, she wouldn't exactly say no. He could even straight up kidnap her, and to begin with, he was the one who left her in my care.

If he told me to give her back...I don't know what I'd be able to say.

"In the end, it's her decision to make, but..."

"Y-Yeah..."

"You *are* the one who raised her so far."

That handsome man hung his head. His black eyes wavered. In sorrow, perhaps? Or maybe something like doubt. Either way, that long pause was probably him searching for the right words. I silently waited for him to continue.

"...I once knew the woman you call the Saint. She was a cheerful woman who always had a kind smile on her lips... She wasn't so sublime to be called a saint. Despite her special power, she was an ordinary woman. She fought the monsters to the very end, even on the verge of death, and passed on with a smile on her lips..."

"But to this day, I still don't know if her life was a blessed one. The fact she possessed such great power made her home village abuse her and call her a witch. A comrade of the monsters. I saw

her own mother pelt her with stones. Even if they're left with no choice, people shirk away from what they can't understand. Having to give up one's peaceful life to wield the power of the Stella just feels...wrong to me."

"...I see."

"She's still too young. I thought an adult should talk things through with her first. Is that really so strange?"

"...No..."

I did think this wasn't something a Mythical would say, but I kept that rude thought to myself. My idea of what the Mythicals were was perhaps more bestial than it should have been...even if Renge was only half a Mythical Beast.

Still, he worried for Tina's future and well-being and consulted me first. In that regard, speaking to him was no different from speaking to a Demi.

"But first, I'll need to see for myself. If that Sugula thing really is in the sky...and Tina's forehead, too," I said.

"You should do that, yes. But we haven't much time. Five years will pass us by before we know it. And she'll need time to travel the world and purify the land with the Stella. Of course, the Mythical Beasts will fully support whoever inherits the power of the Stella.

"But for now, me and my comrades will look for other Spherit Folk survivors or someone else who might be able to wield the Stella. We'll look into why the Sugula is being born, as well... I will visit you within six months. You live in a place called the Rofola Lodge, yes?"

"...Yeah. You do that... Hey?"

"Hm?"

What if he finds someone other than Tina who can use that power? What if it's a child even younger than her or an old man in his last days? And is Tina really the only one who can use it? Isn't there some other way?

True, there were times where I'd wished we had the power of the Stella on our side. But what would happen to Tina if she were to receive it? Even now, other countries could be eyeing her as an advanced alchemical apothecary.

And I knew all too well *why* Edesa Kura hunted down the Spherit Folk. They tore the Spherit Stones out of their foreheads. *And if Tina is a Spherit Folk too, people from other countries could go*

after her, seeking her stone...

And if she had the power of the Stella on top of that, would I have the power to keep her safe? No...I wouldn't.

"You said the only way to stop the Sugula is by purifying the surface of the world with the Stella, right...? Is there really no other way?" I asked.

"I won't say there isn't. Like I've told you before, there was another way. But..."

"You said it was mistaken. But what was that way?"

"Burning it down with my flames."

I swallowed nervously. He narrowed his eyes, resulting in a gaze unique to the Mythicals. *The Mythical Beasts'...flames...*

"My flames can reduce the Kathra, Camila, and Kaguya to ash... But in the past, the Sugula was too massive, and they could not incinerate it entirely. Now it's only just been born, and it's small, so I could perhaps burn it to ashes. But it's too far for me to reach it.

"I used all my power, but my flames couldn't reach it so far away in the sky. It means I have to wait...wait until it grows bigger and approaches Wisty Air. But by the time it does, it will likely already be too big for me to safely destroy it..."

I sighed. So, the Stella was the only answer after all. It was too far in the sky for us to reach it, so our only hope was to make sure it didn't mature by purifying the surface until that purity reached beyond the sky...

"...How long will it take? Purifying the surface, I mean."

"I will help by burning down the monsters, but my flames are fundamentally different from the Stella. They can burn animals that turned into monsters, burning away their very souls. I don't know how long it will take for now...my lowest estimate is that it will take twenty years."

"...Twenty years, you say. I'll probably be dead by then."

In other words, it will take Tina the rest of her life to do this...

I probably wouldn't be alive in twenty years. I couldn't always be at Tina's side. And that was nature's course. The truth all parents must face. Same as how Pops and Ma died ahead of me, I would die before Nakona and Tina. Such is life.

"You said the Sugula will eat the world... What does that mean?"

"It will swallow it whole. Simple as that. The world will be

covered in darkness, and all living things will turn to monsters. Air will then use the Stella to dissolve the monsters into the world and start creation anew.”

I hung my head.

“You can accept this as fate,” Renge continued. “But we will fight to the very end. This is the world my mother loved, so I will fight for it until the last moment. Even if it means showering this world with the primal punishment again.”

He then averted his gaze, making it clear he would rather not do that. The Thousand-Year Blank was caused by the Kaguya destroying all civilization. Doing that would be exchanging one form of destruction for another.

“The world, huh...?” I muttered to myself.

Dusk light filtered into the room after Renge left. The whole situation was too big for me to understand.

And yet...

So long as it made my daughters happy, and gave them a future, I’d do anything. My life had no other purpose.

Afterword

HELLO, everyone. My name is Kiri Komori. It's a pleasure to meet you all. Thank you very much for picking up *Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind, Volume 2*!

I would like to take this chance to thank everyone who read and supported this book. To the editors who reached out to me. To Yamigo for their wonderful illustrations. To Roman Lempert, who handled the translation. To everyone involved with the production of the ebook version. And to the family who always supported me.

Thank you all so, so much.

The "Me at Age Eight" chapter was written especially for this release and introduced Jilril, who was only mentioned by name in the web novel. His character description can be summed up as "a scholar who's fond of hot foods," but once I actually introduced him to the story, he came out a bit crazier than I'd first anticipated!

I also have to say that when I saw Tina and Nakona's more mature designs on the cover art, I couldn't help but scream "How you've grown!" like some kind of doting grandma. It's hard to express how moved I was. I can't wait to see them become even prettier.

Yamigo, really, thank you so much! They're so cute! Like princesses!

Also, in the web novel, Mujimuji was a planned character that ended up not being implemented, so come Volume 3, I'd like to write a chapter about him.

In even more exciting news, Cross Infinite World has informed me that a print edition of the series is in the works! I was shocked. The release date hasn't been decided yet, but apparently, it's slated to happen during 2021.

How exciting! A print release means this series will reach the hands of more readers. Calling it wonderful is an understatement. Once again, thank you for picking up this volume and for supporting this series!



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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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